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# Learning Disabilities in a Poor, Rural School District: Student-Centered or System-Motivated?

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# Learning Disabilities in a Poor, Rural School District:

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We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Thomas L. Fish, Committee Chair

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examined one specific rural school district where many of the students live in poverty. The purpose of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of the learning disability (LD) identification process as implemented in a high-poverty rural setting. In working toward this purpose, I explored the question: How do teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions? I also delved into several related themes including the beliefs that teachers hold about poverty and how it affects their students in the school setting, what teachers believe about their role in a high-poverty setting, and how they determine if a child has a learning disability or if other factors are contributing to their academic difficulties.

Eleven teachers, both special education and general education, were interviewed. Analysis of the data revealed the prevalence of some stereotypical beliefs regarding poverty, including the belief that hard work overcomes poverty, the belief that schools can and should "fix the poverty problem," and a complacency regarding the poverty they witness in their school. In addition, the data revealed that there was a mismatch between teachers' middle class values and background and the social class experiences of their students. Educators in high poverty schools viewed poor student performance more as a problem centered in student and family circumstances rather than as a condition created by inadequate resources and opportunities available to children and families.

The findings revealed use of a traditional, Intelligence Quotient (IQ)-Achievement discrepancy model to determine if a child has a learning disability. Critics of this assessment

procedure deem it a “wait to fail” model because few interventions may be tried before referring students for disability assessment and services. Participants reported that Response to Intervention (RTI) requirements had not been implemented. Furthermore, participants conveyed that their deliberations do not typically include the legally required consideration that other factors (such as poverty) may be the primary reason that the student is struggling.

Recommendations include providing educational activities to challenge stereotypical beliefs about people living in poverty, considering socioeconomic reform in discussions about school improvement, supporting teachers in their efforts to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms, and implementing assessment methods designed to help students receive the assistance needed as early as possible.

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Finally, this paper would not exist without the unwavering support and love of my husband, David, and daughter, Katherine (Katie). Katie was not yet two years old when I started the doctoral program at the University of St. Thomas and she is now seven years old. She and David took care of each other while I attended classes and did my writing. Hopefully my work will contribute to a better world for Katie as she grows up and grapples with the difficult issues that life presents.

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore how teachers in a high-poverty rural school make decisions regarding the identification of students for Learning Disabilities (LD) services. Beyond the legal explanation of how the special education process works, the purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the referral and identification process for LD services from the perspectives of the teachers involved. The results of this research may increase understanding regarding the appropriate use of assessment processes and influence the knowledge of teachers, administrators, and higher education faculty in teacher education programs as they study and implement appropriate assessment procedures for determining LD eligibility. Semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers in one high-poverty school district were employed in this qualitative case study. Although high-poverty urban settings are common settings in the literature, there is a significant lack of research concerning high-poverty rural settings (Books, 1997).

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background of the effects of poverty on education and issues with LD identification. The problem statement, the statement of purpose, and the research questions follow. In addition, I provide a synopsis of the research approach and statement regarding my perspectives, and assumptions in conducting the research. Chapter One concludes with a discussion of the rationale and significance of this study and also definitions of some key terminology.

## Background and Context

There has been considerable attention given to poverty in the schools. The effects of poverty on educational accomplishment appear staggering. Socioeconomic status serves as the strongest single indicator of students' educational outcomes (Levin, 2007). Where you are born and raised has significant implications for what you are able to be and do (Levin, 2007). The number of children living in low-income households has increased from 37 percent in 2000 to 42 percent in 2009. Based on a comparison and analysis of test scores, children attending high-poverty schools perform at much lower levels in reading and mathematics than their peers who attend low-poverty schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

As students living in poverty enter school, teachers struggle to meet their needs. National debate rages over who should be held accountable for the achievement of the millions of low-achieving students in our poorest schools. Some experts contend that schools can and should "fix the poverty problem," while others (Gibboney, 2008; Rothstein, 2008) propose that the issues involved with serving students living in poverty are much more complex and require a multi-faceted approach. Surrounded by this debate, many teachers try to do their best work under what may often seem like insurmountable circumstances.

One of the difficult tasks facing teachers in high-poverty schools is determining which students qualify for special education services. Because so many students in high-poverty settings demonstrate significant academic needs, it is especially challenging to ascertain which students have learning disabilities and which students are struggling educationally due to

factors related to their low socioeconomic status. Research indicates that LD identification is problematic and that the rates of misidentification are high (Bocian, Beebe, McMillan, & Gresham, 1999). There is also research supporting the contention that teachers make decisions about special education referral and placement based on socioeconomic factors (Darley & Gross, 1983; Podell & Soodak, 1993).

This study seeks to uncover the LD identification practices in one high-poverty rural context. I do not purport to determine if the referrals or placement decisions made in this setting were appropriate or not, only to explore the thoughts, beliefs, and processes of the teachers in this setting.

## Problem Statement

Teachers encounter difficulties in distinguishing between struggling students lacking access to opportunities and resources due to poverty as compared to those with a genuine learning disability based on the legal definition of LD. Teachers in higher poverty settings likely experience greater difficulty identifying students for special education services due to the increased number of struggling students found in high poverty schools. Because school personnel may be held accountable for providing special education services to the appropriate students and must avoid labeling and serving students not meeting the legal definition of LD, I examined the beliefs teachers held regarding high poverty students and their practices with regard to identifying students for LD services.

## Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how teachers in one high-poverty rural school district make LD identification decisions. To investigate the problem, I adopted the following question: How do teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions? I created several sub-questions to support my investigation: (1) What beliefs do teachers hold about poverty and how it affects their students? (2) What do teachers believe about their role in a high-poverty setting? and (3) How do they determine if a child has a learning disability or if other factors (such as poverty) are contributing to their academic difficulties?

## Research Approach

With the approval of the University of St Thomas Institutional Review Board, I investigated the experiences and perceptions of 11 teachers from one high-poverty rural school district. The teachers were volunteer participants from both special education and general education in elementary, middle, and high school settings.

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Secondary methods included researcher observations of the community and field notes describing my experiences during the study. I also conducted a review of online documents to obtain background and statistical information about the community and school district. The information obtained through the 11 interviews formed the basis for the overall findings of this study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, the school district, and the names of

surrounding towns and cities. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. A comprehensive review of the literature and input from experienced researchers shaped and refined the data-collection methods. Coding categories were developed and refined throughout the analysis of the data. In addition, I used inter-rater reliability in the coding process and peer review as the study progressed.

## Assumptions

Based on my background as a general education teacher, a special education teacher, and a teacher educator and my knowledge of LD practices and requirements, I made some assumptions regarding the teachers participating in this study and also the nature of identifying and offering LD services.

I assumed all of the teachers had taken at least one course in special education as part of their pre-service education. This assumption was based on the state licensing requirements for the case study site. Second, it was assumed that all of the special education teachers had taken at least one course in assessment practices specific to special education. This assumption is also based upon state licensing requirements. I also assumed LD identification is often fraught with ambiguity due to my research on the difficulties associated with trying to distinguish between struggling students and students with a LD (Bocian, Beebe, McMillan, & Gresham, 1999; Shaywitz et al., 1990; White, 2002). In other words I knew the difficulties they

would encounter with identifying students for LD services and stayed open to learning the way they used their knowledge and made decisions to recommend students for LD services.

Based on my experience as a former teacher, I also knew there were times when the law regarding identification is interpreted differently to best meet the needs of an individual student. In other words, the exact wording of the law can be manipulated to mean more than one thing, depending on the situation. Because high-poverty rural settings have high numbers of students who need additional assistance, I assumed teachers may find ways to meet the needs of students, regardless of what "standard procedure" may dictate. As in the prior assumptions, this assertion is grounded in my professional background, experiences as a teacher serving students in a high-poverty rural school as well as discussions with peers in similar contexts. While I held these assumptions, I set them aside and kept an open mind regarding how the referral and identification process actually worked and the teachers' views regarding how to best serve their students.

## The Researcher

I began as a general education teacher in a high-poverty rural school district and also worked as a special education teacher. In both of these roles, I participated in numerous meetings where the members needed to decide if a particular student qualified for special education services in the area of LD.

At the time of this study, I was an assistant professor in a teacher education program in the same state as the case study site. In this position, I had the unique opportunity to teach multiple sections of the one special education class that all preservice teachers are required to take. I have also taught the assessment course that all students in the special education program must complete. Observation of student teachers as well as informal conversations with teachers in the field have informed my views. Thus, I bring practical experience to the study.

My background offers additional insights into the study but may also create concerns with bias. Because I taught in a high-poverty rural school, the setting is approached with personal biases and assumptions of what it means to teach in settings similar to the case site presented here. Although I made every attempt to report and analyze the data as the participants delivered it, there were personal decisions made about what to include and exclude from the study as it developed. Acknowledging my assumptions and potential bias and making these issues known from the beginning strengthens the credibility of the study. It is also significant that peer review and inter-rater checks on coding reliability were conducted.

## Rationale and Significance

The research presented in this paper has significance because of its rural context, because it is a qualitative study in a field traditionally dominated by quantitative research, and because it adds to the literature addressing a topic that is highly relevant due to the current

implementation of recent legislation that introduces new assessment strategies for determining LD eligibility.

**Rural Significance**

Researchers have already established the link between poverty and education, demonstrating that there is a correlation between poverty and delayed language development, lower literacy rates, poor math skills, and higher rates of emotional and behavioral disabilities (Manning & Gaudelli, 2006). In *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, Kozol (1991) described the inferior physical facilities in which poor students are educated. His description of urban schools includes boarded up windows, faulty heating and cooling systems, toilets that do not work, crowded rooms, peeling paint, and kitchens and cafeterias tainted with backed up sewage. Kozol speaks with anger and sadness about significant, ongoing disparities in public schooling. He articulated what most of us already know: Children in wealthier districts tend to get much more than children in poorer districts of almost everything money can buy for schools: nice buildings, good teachers, up-to-date textbooks, extracurricular activities, and so on. While Kozol raised awareness regarding the plight of the urban poor, the experiences of students in rural settings lacks a compelling voice; most of the research on poverty and education has been conducted using data from urban settings (Books, 1997). The significance of this research involves its focus on rural settings.

Although rural children are more likely to be poor than either non-rural children or children in the United States overall (Sherman, 1992), the literature revealed little about the

rural poor (Books, 1997). This study contributes to the void of studies regarding rural poverty and its effects on the education of children.

**Qualitative Significance**

In order to learn more about how teachers in high-poverty rural schools make decisions about disability status, I employed a qualitative approach. Due to the lack of qualitative research in special education, (McPhail, 1995; Schnorr, 1995; Shen, 1997), in depth studies of teachers and their work with regard to identifying and serving students with LD seems absent in the literature. The discipline of special education has come to accept and undertake the practice of qualitative research methodology much more slowly and reluctantly than the field of educational research as a whole. Although qualitative studies now appear in journals such as *Remedial and Special Education, Learning Disability Quarterly,* and *Exceptional Children*, the works tend to reflect a narrowly defined application of the qualitative paradigm, providing narratives of individuals with disabilities.

Qualitative studies in the area of special education have done the important work of telling the stories of individuals with disabilities and advocating for and addressing disability-related issues, but typically focus on disability in isolation, rather than considering issues such as race and class as important contextual variables (Pugach, 2001). Pugach contends that qualitative research is ideal for studying the overrepresentation of students living in poverty in special education programs. Researchers should use qualitative research to locate and distinguish the voices of disability as compared to the voices of groups oppressed because of

race, class, culture, or language. I accepted Pugach's challenge by using qualitative methods to examine individual voices within the larger context of poverty and schooling.

**Significance of Learning Disabilities (LD) Identification**

Despite decades of research, educators still grapple with a common definition of learning disabilities and an acceptable method of identification (Keogh, 2005). The latest initiative in the area of LD identification is Response to Intervention (RTI) which is explained in greater detail in Chapter Two. RTI was established in the 2004 revision of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The rate of implementation has varied significantly from one context to another. Although initial RTI studies have been conducted across the country, the amount of information on the implementation of RTI in high-poverty rural settings is limited. The current study contributes a unique perspective on a timely topic.

## Definition of Terms

I adopted the following definitions used in this study to clarify how these terms were used in my study and to make the information accessible to the reader. Many of the terms used by participants during interviews might be classified as "educational jargon", and may not be known by readers outside the field of education. For these reasons, the following definitions are provided:

**Special Education**: An educational program that is designed to meet an individual's unique needs (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010).

**Learning Disabilities (LD):** A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(10)).

**Response to Intervention (RTI):** A method of academic intervention defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. RTI is designed to provide early, effective assistance to children who are having difficulty learning (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

**Individualized Education Program (IEP):** A written plan for serving students with disabilities ages 3 to 21 (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

## Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One provides an outline of the problem, purpose, and research questions for the study. This research is being conducted in order to develop a deeper understanding of how the assessment process for determining Learning Disability (LD) eligibility is being implemented in a high-poverty rural setting. Chapter One also includes a brief introduction to the research approach and the significance of the research. Essentially the research is significant because of its rural context, because it is a qualitative study in a field traditionally dominated by quantitative research, and because it adds to the literature addressing a topic that is highly relevant due to the current implementation of new legislation.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related to the identification of learning disabilities and the role of social class in American education. The literature provides a framework for understanding the history of learning disabilities identification, the controversial nature of the definition of learning disabilities, the models currently used to identify students with learning disabilities, and issues surrounding the discourse of learning disabilities. In Chapter Two I also discuss literature addressing the role of social class in American education, including the characteristics of poor schools in general and characteristics specific to rural poverty. Research on overrepresentation issues in special education and the link between poverty and special education are also discussed. This review of literature provides the background for understanding the significance of the current study within the context of a larger body of research.

Chapter Three includes a detailed methodology of the study. Chapter Three encompasses the overall strategy of the study, participant selection, a rich description of the context in which the study was conducted, the data collection and analysis processes, the limitations of the study, and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four includes the analysis of the data and the reporting of findings. The data analysis is conducted within the framework constructed by the literature review. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from interviews with 11 different teachers, both general and special education. Chapter Four discusses findings addressing teacher beliefs and practice related to LD identification.

In Chapter Five, I analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized the findings according to the following analytic categories: (1) How the teachers' middle class backgrounds and beliefs about poverty detract from consideration of economic reform; and (2) The mismatch between the teachers' perceptions of the LD identification process and what is mandated by law. These analytic categories emerged as I considered the data and findings through the lens of critical theory. I organized the data into distinct categories for analysis and then used my understanding of scholarly literature and theory to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how LD identification decisions were made in a high-poverty rural school.

Chapter Six concludes the study, summarizing the major findings and offering recommendations for teachers, administrators, and teacher preparation programs with regard to my findings and ways to improve existing practices. In the next chapter I review topical and analytic literature related to my research question, establishing a conceptual framework for my study.

# CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to address the question regarding how teachers in high-poverty rural school districts make identification decisions regarding learning disabilities, I reviewed scholarly literature from a variety of sources. The method for selecting literature included an emphasis on peer-reviewed journals with the most recent publication dates, although relevant historical resources are also included. I examined quantitative and qualitative literature and used primary sources over secondary sources when making decisions about which literature to include. The findings from the review are organized into three primary sections of this chapter: Identification of Learning Disabilities, Learning Disabilities Discourse, and The Role of Social Class in American Education. The first section contains a description of the history regarding the identification of students with learning disabilities and later the ways to determine if a struggling student may be a student with a learning disability.

## History of Learning Disabilities Identification

Although it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the United States federal government addressed learning disabilities through task forces, legislation, and funding, the roots of learning disabilities (LD) as a concept can be traced back to the early 1800s. The history of the field of learning disabilities can be described in four time periods: (1) the foundation phase, (2) the transition phase, (3) the integration phase, and (4) the new directions phase (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

**Foundation phase (1800-1930).** The earliest professionals to examine the phenomenon of learning disabilities were physicians, anatomists, and physiologists who attempted to explain

the behavior resulting from brain injury in soldiers (Carlson, 2005). These scientists also investigated the brain damage of adult patients who had suffered a stroke, an accident, or a disease. They gathered information by studying the behavior of patients who had lost a specific function, such as the ability to speak. Following the patient's death, an autopsy was performed, allowing scientists to link specific functions with particular areas of the brain. Although the foundation phase occurred prior to the creation of the field of learning disabilities, the research conducted provided the groundwork for our present understanding of learning disabilities (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Because of the nature of the research, the most widely accepted theories for impairments in memory or language in the early to mid-1800s were based on the belief that an imperfection existed within the brain.

By the late 1800s, physicians and ophthalmologists migrated from brain injury theories to a dominant view that visual processing deficiencies were responsible for an individual's impaired ability to read letters or words. In 1877, a German physician named Adolph Kassmaul was the first to refer to the inability to read as "word blindness" (Hagw & Silver, 1990). This term is still used to describe a form of dyslexia, although research has since determined that dyslexia is a form of language processing deficiency rather than an impairment of the visual system.

**Transition phase (1920-1960).** American researchers began to focus on reading and language disabilities in the 1920s. The phenomenon of learning disabilities was referred to as the "invisible handicap" and was attributed to perceptual, perceptual-motor, and attention disabilities. Samuel Orton, Grace Fernald, Marion Monroe, and Samuel Kirk were four of the

researchers who made significant contributions to the understanding of LD during this era (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

After working with brain-damaged adults, Samuel Orton decided to study why some children with apparently intact neurological functioning have language and reading disabilities. He observed that some children tended to reverse letters or transpose their order, despite their average to above average intelligence. Orton reported that some of his research subjects could read more easily if they held the text up to a mirror and some were able to write this way as well. Orton's name is most widely recognized in the Orton-Gillingham teaching method which he created with Anna Gillingham, a psychologist who organized the English language into its discrete sounds such that they could be explicitly taught to children. The Orton-Gillingham teaching method is still widely used for children with reading difficulties such as dyslexia. Orton's primary contributions to the field of LD are his emphasis on a phonics-based approach to reading instruction and his support of multi-sensory teaching methods (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

Grace Fernald's contributions to the field of learning disabilities include a kinesthetic reading and spelling method which essentially required students to trace words. Her work continues to influence the kinesthetic approaches often used today in special education and remedial reading. Fernald differed from Orton and Gillingham in that she did not support a phonics-based approach that included sounding out letters and words. The Fernald method included an emphasis on reading and writing words as wholes rather than separate phonemes (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

Marion Monroe served as Orton's research associate and had experience with both his teaching methods and those prescribed by Fernald (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). She used a combination of kinesthetic tracing techniques and sound blending to successfully teach children with reading disabilities to read. Monroe conducted a number of well-documented field studies to test various methods. Monroe's summary of the studies points to the need for intensive instruction by well-trained teachers:

> Two hundred and thirty-five children were given remedial training by one hundred and thirty-one teachers. Progress in reading was made in a large percentage of cases studied, not only when children were trained under carefully controlled laboratory conditions, but also under conditions possible in public schools. Progress in reading was made under individual instruction and also in small groups of children. (Monroe, 1932, p. 138)

Monroe's work was applied directly in educational settings, allowing teachers to implement her strategies on a daily basis.

Monroe's experience contributes to the current field of learning disabilities in two important ways (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). First, Monroe introduced the notion of discrepancy between actual achievement and expected achievement as a way of identifying students with reading disabilities. Second, she went beyond depending on standardized tests as the sole method for assessing students with reading disabilities. Monroe suggested analyzing the specific types of reading errors children made on the tests rather than simply reporting scores.

This assessment practice can be used to guide instruction, thus introducing the concept of what would later be called diagnostic-prescriptive teaching (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

Samuel Kirk was influenced by Orton, Fernald, and Monroe. Their influence is apparent in *Remedial Reading Drills* (Hegge, Kirk, & Kirk, 1936), a book that featured an approach that was a "carefully programmed phonic system which emphasizes sound blending and kinesthetic experiences. The program is based upon the following principles: minimal change; overlearning; prompting and confirmation; one response for each symbol; and social reinforcement" (Wiederholt, 1974, p. 32).

Kirk's emphasis on educational programming was in stark contrast to the theories of organic impairment that were being proposed by researchers such as Alfred Strauss and Laura Lehtinen (1947) who used the term "the brain-injured child" and the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare which used the label "minimal brain dysfunction" during this same time frame (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

In addition to specific recommendations regarding educational programming, Kirk also worked on refining an assessment approach for pinpointing specific disabilities in children, resulting in the *Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities* (*ITPA*) in 1961 (Kirk, McCarthy, & Kirk, 1961). Samuel Kirk is probably best known for his contribution of the term "learning disabilities." Although many sources (Carlson, 2005; Danforth, 2009; Lerner & Johns, 2009) cite the first use of the term as 1963, Kirk actually defined learning disabilities in the first edition of his *Educating Exceptional Children* (1962), a widely used college introductory text for special education.

Although researchers were unable to prove that LD had a neurological basis in the 1960s, middle-class parents were quick to embrace theories that described their child's difficulty in school as a neurological dysfunction rather than mental retardation. While a diagnosis of mental retardation indicates sub average intelligence, the concept of neurological dysfunction assumes average intelligence. Parents of children with LD had seen evidence of intelligence in their child, but had no explanation for the child's failure in school.

In 1963 a group of concerned parents and educators met in Chicago. The participants belonged to small, community-based groups, but were hoping to link these more localized efforts into a single organization. Each group had been referring to the children of concern with different terms, including "children with perceptual handicaps," "brain-injured children," and "neurologically impaired children." They needed to agree on a common term if they were going to unite the groups. At this meeting, Kirk suggested the term "learning disabilities," which was met with immediate approval (cited in Lerner & Johns, 2009). The national organization known today as the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDAA) was founded at this historic meeting.

The LD label became a socially acceptable explanation for many parents, particularly those in the middle class who did not want their child labeled mentally retarded:

> [i]n the first 10 years after the coining of the term, the vast majority of students labeled as having LD were White, middle class boys. Thus, the creation of special classes and programs for students labeled as having LD allowed White, middle class parents to secure services for their children without "mixing in" with other identified students, who

were more likely to come from lower classes and minority backgrounds. (Ferri, 2004, p. 511)

The LD label "satisfied a national need at a particular historical moment" (Reid & Valle, 2004). The trend for LD placement in more recent years has shifted such that students from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds are now overrepresented in the LD area (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Eitle, 2002; Lambert, 1981; Losen, 2002; Macmillan & Reschly, 1998; Meyer & Patton, 2001; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Samuels, 2004; Serwatka, Deering, & Grant, 1995; Smith, 2001).

**Integration phase (1960-1980).** Many changes took place between 1960 and 1980. The federal government became involved and established resources and guidelines to assist the public school systems in educating students with LD issues (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Parents and advocates began to develop major organizations such as the Division for Children with Learning Disabilities within the Council for Exceptional Children and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (1963). Not only did research change the scientific view of LD, but the general public's awareness of LD improved significantly as learning disabilities became an established discipline in schools across the United States. Programs were developed, teachers participated in training, and children began to receive services for learning disabilities (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

The impetus for the implementation of LD services in the schools was the passage of the first comprehensive special education law, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142, 1975). Prior to the passage of PL 94-142, some states were already establishing laws

that required schools to educate students with learning disabilities, but the federal legislation passed in 1975 established LD as a category eligible for funding for direct services (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act became the cornerstone of special education, requiring public schools to provide "free appropriate public education" to students with a wide range of disabilities.

Initially, most programs for students with LD were at the elementary level where students were placed in separate classrooms and taught a specialized curriculum. Later, the resource room model became more prevalent, meaning that students would attend classes with their general education peers for portions of the day and receive instruction in a separate classroom based on their individual needs for other segments of their school day. With the development of resource rooms, LD services became more prevalent in the secondary schools (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

**New directions phase (1980-present).** The most recent history in the field of learning disabilities can be characterized by increases in inclusionary practices, cultural and linguistic diversity, and assistive and instructional technology (Lerner & Johns, 2009). The field of LD also addressed new identification and assessment issues as outlined in current federal legislation.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA-2004) requires that students be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and have access to the general education curriculum. This means that, to the greatest extent appropriate, students with disabilities should be with students who do not have disabilities (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom has

increased significantly in recent years (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Between 1987 and 2006, the percentage of students with learning disabilities who received all of their instruction in the general education classroom increased from 17 percent to 47 percent. An additional 38 percent of students with learning disabilities spend part of their day in a special education resource room and the rest of their day in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In total, 85 percent of students with learning disabilities spend at least part of their day in the general education classroom. This trend toward more inclusive settings certainly has implications for the role of the general education teacher.

Cultural and linguistic diversity have increased creating opportunities and challenges in today's schools. Learning disabilities occur in all cultures and ethnic groups and it is often difficult to tell if a child's academic struggles are due to a learning disability or a cultural or language difference (Ortiz, 1997; Taylor, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). My case study school district lacks cultural diversity, but in the United States as a whole nearly one of every three students is from a minority background—African American, Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American (Lerner & Johns, 2009).

A trend of increasing assistive technology is also prevalent in the new directions phase of LD history. In 1988, Congress passed the Assistive Technology Act (PL 108-364), providing funding to provide persons with disabilities access to and use of assistive technology devices. Assistive technology is defined as "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities" (Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act, 2004 Regulations, 34 CFR 300). When a student is identified as having a learning disability, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team must now determine if the student would benefit from the use of assistive technology. For a student with a learning disability, this might include technology such as word processors, speech recognition systems, electronic spell checkers, "talking computers," and other educational software (Bryant, Bryant, & Raskind, 1998).

In addition to increases in inclusion, diversity, and assistive technology, recent history brings legislation that has changed the way students are identified for special education services (Regulations for the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of IDEA 2004, 2006), namely the response-to-intervention (RTI) model. The RTI model is intended to prevent academic failure for students who are having difficulty learning and allow schools a new option for determining if a child has a learning disability that requires specialized instruction (Lerner & Johns, 2009). RTI is discussed extensively in a subsequent section of this chapter.

## Current Definition of Learning Disabilities

In order to understand the identification of students with learning disabilities, it is important to understand how learning disabilities are defined. Federal special education law has been revised over the years, but the same basic rights are guaranteed. The most recent revision of the law is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004). Under special education law, Learning Disabilities are defined as:

> …a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(10))

However, learning disabilities do not include, "...learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage" (34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(10)). In other words, a child with a learning disability demonstrates average or above average intelligence but has an unexpected or unexplained delay in one or more areas.

The definition of learning disabilities has been a controversial topic since the late 1960s (Bateman, 2005). There is significant evidence that the lack of a consistently applied definition has led to misidentification of LD in the U.S. (Dombrowski et al., 2004). One study found that only 39 percent of students with the LD label actually qualified for services based on the official definition and criteria for eligibility (Bocian, Beebe, McMillan, & Gresham, 1999).

The lack of consistency in how learning disabilities are defined also becomes apparent when a student in one state may qualify for services because of a learning disability, but the same student may not be classified as learning disabled in a different state (Weintraub, 2005). Incidence rates support this assertion. The state of Georgia, for example, reports that 3.20% of its students have learning disabilities, while its neighbor South Carolina has an incidence rate of

6.12% (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). South Carolina, however, has a lower rate of placement in the area of emotional-behavioral disabilities. The overall incidence rate of students receiving disabilities services is consistent across states, but it is reasonable to suggest that there are differences in how criteria or practices are used within each state to determine who is or is not learning disabled (Weintraub, 2005). In other words, the same percentage of students are identified as having a need for special education, but states differ in what label they assign students.

There is also evidence that the "exclusionary clauses" of the LD definition (i.e., environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage) are often ignored (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). One study (Harris, Gray, Davis, Zaremba, & Argulewicz, 1997) found that less than half of the school psychologists surveyed considered exclusionary criteria when making a diagnosis of LD and 37 percent admitted ignoring or trying to get around the clause. There is evidence to suggest that these practices serve to provide struggling students with services, even if the diagnosis is incorrect (Shepard, 1983).

The following sections describe two accepted methods for determining if a child has a learning disability: the traditional IQ-Achievement discrepancy model and the more recently designed Response to Intervention (RTI) model.

## The IQ-Achievement Discrepancy Model of Identification

Given the definition provided in IDEA 2004, the federal government charges schools with the responsibility of deciding which children qualify for services under the category of Specific Learning Disability. Traditionally, schools have used an IQ-Achievement discrepancy

model which entails determining the child's intelligence using an individually-administered IQ test. The IQ test supposedly provides an estimate of the child's potential for learning. Special education teachers or school psychologists also administer an achievement test to determine how much the child has actually learned. Using the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model, the two scores are compared and if there is a significant discrepancy between the child's IQ (innate ability) and achievement (actual performance on academic tests), the child can be labeled as having a Learning Disability (LD) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

There are several criticisms of this particular model. The tests used to measure IQ and achievement only provide a limited amount of information about how a child actually performs in the classroom (Lerner & Johns, 2009). In addition, the assessments used do not always discriminate between actual learning disabilities and the results of inadequate teaching. Another criticism of the discrepancy model is that students can be misidentified due to teacher or testing bias.

Perhaps the most problematic issue with the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model is that it is a "wait to fail" approach. Statistically speaking, most children with LD are not identified until age nine (Lerner & Johns, 2009). It typically takes a number of years before the discrepancy between a child's achievement and IQ is severe enough to qualify for services. While educators are waiting for the student's achievement to drop far enough to meet the criteria for a severe discrepancy valuable learning opportunities for more intense instruction are lost. Hence, the commonly accepted premise that the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model is a "wait to fail" approach (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

## The Response-to-Intervention Model of Identification

In the most recent revision of special education law (IDEA 2004), states are granted the option of using a Response to Intervention (RTI) method of identifying students with LD in lieu of the traditional discrepancy model. The intent behind RTI is to provide struggling students with appropriate interventions before they experience repeated academic failure (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007). Although the specifics of implementation are decided upon by individual school districts, a standard protocol includes:

- Universal screening: This component entails collecting data about the performance of each student in the school in order to determine which students are struggling learners. For example, some schools assess each student at three points during the school year using screening devices that are quick and relatively easy to administer.
- Tier One: Class or school-wide interventions. Tier one instruction is provided to all students and is considered "primary prevention." In this tier, all students receive effective, research-validated instruction. Student progress is monitored on a weekly basis.
- Tier Two: Students who are not making adequate progress in tier one receive tier two instruction which typically includes different or additional support from the classroom teacher or from another educational professional such as a reading specialist. Progress monitoring continues.

- Tier Three: Students who are not making adequate progress in tier two receive tier three instruction which is considered more intensive than tier two instruction. Tier three instruction might include individualized interventions, possible disability identification and subsequent special education placement. (Lerner & Johns, 2009)

RTI is based on the premise that all students are provided with "generally effective" instruction by their classroom teacher and that progress is monitored on a consistent basis (Fuchs et al., 2003). An RTI model also includes the principle that any student who does not respond to typical instruction has an opportunity for more explicit, intensive, and/or supportive instruction (Torgesen, 2002).

Potential benefits of the RTI approach include research-based instructional practices for all students and early intervention (Fuchs et. al., 2003). Instead of "waiting to fail," students begin receiving intensive instruction at the earliest sign of trouble. Students whose learning needs can be remediated through more systematic instruction do not require placement in special education programs. Students who do not meet the severe discrepancy criteria are still having their academic needs met. An IQ test, which does not provide useful data for instructional planning, is no longer a part of the eligibility process (Lyon et al., 2001).

Because RTI is a relatively new initiative it is difficult to assess its effectiveness on a large scale. Critics of the RTI construct argue that the proponents of RTI:

> …appear to have been overly optimistic and often incomplete in their presentations of the RTI model, with regard to its research support, ease of implementation, breadth of

> applications in the schools, clarity of what constitutes responsiveness, and the ability to benefit children with Learning Disabilities. (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009, p. 130)

Clearly there is still work to be done in order to support RTI with a research base that validates its effectiveness and provide responses to the issues of its critics. At this time, however, compelling evidence shows that Response to Intervention (RTI) is our best hope for giving every student the additional time and support needed to learn at high levels (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005).

Regardless of the method used to determine eligibility for LD, some theorists (Linton, 1998; Olkin, 2002; Skrtic, 1986) remind us that labels such as "learning disabilities" are part of the discourse of special education that may need to be examined on a deeper level. In the next section, I discuss two areas of learning disability discourse: the medicalization of LD and the role of labeling deviance theory in understanding LD.

## Learning Disability Discourse

The discussion about how to determine if a child has a learning disability may give the impression that LD is a thing that can be defined and quantified in a scientific manner. The discourse used to define LD also assumes a deficit model (Linton, 1998). In other words, a child with LD is not merely different from his classmates; he is lacking skills that our culture has identified as critical for success. Yet, difference does not need to characterize the situation as a problem. Perhaps our tendency to identify difference as a deficit means that "we are deficient in language to describe it any other way than as a 'problem'" (Linton, 1998, p. 141). One

example of our limited thinking about disability is the medical model that is embraced by our society.

## Medicalization of Learning Disabilities

The medical model describes disability as a problem or a measurable defect located in the individual that needs a cure that can be provided by experts. The medical model is the most common model for conceptualizing disability in the United States and how problems are defined leads to the search for solutions in specific directions (Olkin, 2002). Evidence of the medical model in special education is found in the language we use to talk about our students. Special education teachers often refer to their students as a "caseload" or call themselves the "case manager" for a particular student. General education teachers do not refer to their pupils in this manner, but it is common practice in the field of special education.

The medical model can be classified into what Alfred N. Whitehead has termed The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness. Whitehead (1925) describes this fallacy as "the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete" (p. 64). In the case of disability labels, perhaps we are assuming concreteness where there is none. Because the criteria set by both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) support this belief by using quantifiable criteria to establish the presence of a learning disability, it is not so surprising that a teacher might assume that numbers alone provide evidence of a possible learning disability.

Despite the use of quantifiable criteria to "diagnose" (another medical term) learning disabilities and the assertion (by definition) that learning disabilities have a neurological basis,

there are no physiological tests to confirm the presence or absence of a learning disability. Using the criteria set by IDEA and DSM, misdiagnosis is widespread. In experiments in which professionals were given descriptions of students who might have LD and asked to classify these students on the basis of their test scores professionals frequently classified students as LD who should have been classified as nondisabled (White, 2002). The Connecticut Longitudinal Study found that only 45 percent of the children schools had classified as LD matched those the researchers classified as LD (Shaywitz et al., 1990). The data seem to support the contention that the LD label may in fact be rooted in Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

The metaphor of LD as a medical condition is also perpetuated in literature intended for parents and the general public (White, 2002). A National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) publication presents LD as a difficult medical diagnosis beginning with a set of symptoms (inability to communicate, or to focus attention, or to make sense of letters and numbers) and presents case studies. While providing parents with a reassuring sense of faith in scientific progress, the NIMH brochure acknowledges the uncertainties of an LD diagnosis with the following:

> Learning disability is not a diagnosis in the same sense as "chickenpox" or "mumps." Chickenpox and mumps imply a single, known cause with a predictable set of symptoms. Rather, LD is a broad term that covers a pool of possible causes, symptoms, treatments, and outcomes. Partly because learning disabilities can show up in so many forms, it is

> difficult to diagnose or to pinpoint the causes. And no one knows of a pill or remedy that will cure them. (NIMH, 1993, p. 4)

While admitting that LD is not as concrete a diagnosis as other medical conditions, the NIMH still places it firmly within the medical frame of reference and definitively as a within-the-child deficiency.

The medical model neatly simplifies our explanation for why some students are not successful in school. There is something wrong with the child, not with their education or our society. Fixing a within-the-child deficiency is certainly more palatable than taking on the larger issues of social change. "LD provides an explanation for failure, failure that is 'unexpected' and, therefore, doesn't require social change" (White, 2002, p. 726). In other words, school failure is an anomaly that needs to be addressed with specialized instruction directed at individual students who demonstrate this particular anomaly. Ferri (2004) eloquently points out that "disability is located in inaccessible learning environments rather than within students" (p. 513). She proposes:

> If we put our energy into transforming the general education classroom into a place where diverse learners can all thrive and succeed, we would both widen the influence of our practice and make an important contribution to the democratic goals of education for all. (p. 513)

In a society accustomed to the medical model of disability, it is difficult to change perceptions, especially in the field of special education. The field of special education has been dismissive of its critics and unwilling to question its taken-for-granted beliefs (Skrtic, 1986). Traditionally,

schools have assumed that when a student fails to succeed in a general education program, he/she must have a disability. "Rarely does special education testing assess the effectiveness and quality of the *teaching* that the student has received" (Buffum et al., 2010).

In addition to examining research related to the medical model of disability, I also reviewed related literature that questions the validity of labeling individuals based upon common characteristics.

**Labeling Deviance Theory and Learning Disabilities**

Theorists who embrace labeling deviance theory (sometimes referred to as labeling theory) question the status quo and are unwilling to accept the taken-for-granted beliefs regarding human difference. Labeling deviance theory (with its grounding in symbolic interactionism) clearly defines disability as a social construct, challenging the idea that LD is a concrete, measurable set of characteristics (Fitch, 2002).

In the 1960s and 1970s a number of theorists (Goffman, 1963; Fitch, 2002; Smith et al., 1986) challenged the practice of using labels in the field of special education. During the 1960s, researchers such as Erving Goffman (1963) described the negative interpersonal effects of labeling individuals as deviant. Jane Mercer disputed the assumption that disability is a deficit within the individual, highlighting the negative effects of special education labeling and the consequential segregation from typically developing peers (Fitch, 2002).

The basic premise of labeling theory is that deviance (in this case, disability) is defined by the social audience that witnesses the deviant behavior, not by the individual engaged in the behavior (Smith et al., 1986). In other words, there is nothing intrinsically different about a

child with learning disabilities. LD exists because members of our society who are in positions of power have created a list of characteristics that constitute this particular disability:

> From this perspective social groups are said to create deviance by making rules whose violation constitutes deviance and by applying their rules to certain people and, hence, labeling them deviant. Labeling theorists also contend that these rules (and, therefore, ultimately deviance) are the result of interaction and negotiation among vested interest groups and that a group must ultimately have power in order to enforce its views on others and subsequently affix the label. The theory also indicates that those with power to define deviance will sometimes make such decisions on the basis of factors other than the deviant act itself, such as the actor's race, ethnicity, social class, or personal mannerisms. (Smith et al., 1986, p. 195)

Specific examples of how socioeconomic factors influence educational decision-making are provided in subsequent sections of this chapter. The literature also provides significant support for race as a determinant for who is classified as disabled (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Eitle, 2002; Lambert, 1981; Losen, 2002; Macmillan & Reschly, 1998; Meyer & Patton, 2001; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Samuels, 2004; Serwatka, Deering, & Grant, 1995; Smith, 2001). When labelers have power that extends beyond the definition of the disability category there is certainly the potential for oppression.

While labeling deviance theory addresses power as a factor in the labeling process, some theorists (Fitch, 2002) provide a much more critical view of labeling deviance theory and encourage a closer examination of the power structures inherent in labeling individuals:

> Rather than conceptualizing power as something that is simply exercised by the powerful to control the less powerful, it is understood as that which produces reality, defines the relations, the contexts, and the conditions of possibility that create the powerful and less powerful. As Michael Foucault would have it, as long as the discourse of special education is dominated by the power of a normalizing technology of measuring, categorizing, and labeling it can not help but produce the "not normal," the "other." (Fitch, 2002, p. 469-470)

Fitch contends that the use of labeling deviance theory in the 1960s was an oversimplification of the situation and that the theory was misused, particularly in the field of special education. He points out that while conventional labeling theory recognizes the importance of language in the social construction of deviance, it does not offer viable solutions (Fitch, 2002).

## The Role of Social Class in American Education

Social classes are a major feature of American society and there are wide differences among classes based on wealth, income, status, culture, and power. Among industrialized countries, the United States ranks first in military technology, military exports, and Gross Domestic Product. We have more billionaires than any other nation, yet one in six American children is born poor. The number of poor children was at its lowest in 1973. Since 2000, both the number and the rate have risen. In 2007 there were 13.3 million poor children in the United States, an increase of 500,000 between 2006 and 2007. These numbers are expected to increase as families face the full impact of the recession. Each day in America 2,583 babies are born into poverty. Even though the United States ranks first in health technology, 2,224 babies

are born without health insurance each day (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). In the following sections I present the research describing how children born into poverty fare in the educational system.

**The Effect of Socioeconomic Status on Education: An Historical Context**

What happens to these children as they enter school? Historically, socioeconomic status (SES) has affected educational opportunities. As early as 1916, Dewey discussed the negative influence of class on education. Dewey described the education of students with low SES mainly as specific trade preparation which led to the perpetuation of the division of the social classes. In his book, *Elmstown's Youth*, Hollingshead (1949) described the differential treatment received by the poor, middle-class, and upper-middle-class students. This differential treatment included teachers unfairly grading and disciplining students who were poor, as well as upper-middle-class students rejecting peers outside their socioeconomic class.

During the postwar period the negative impact of poverty on education was noted in a comparison of the schools of the inner-city slums and the more affluent suburbs (Conant, 1961). In the slums, there was a high drop-out rate, lack of adequate housing, and lower scholastic aptitude and school achievement. There were also significant differences noted in the availability of money and programs, the home environments, and family attitudes toward school (Conant, 1961).

In the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress requested a survey concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals in the United States. In response

to this request, Coleman (1966) conducted an extensive examination of student achievement in which he concluded that socioeconomic factors had a strong relation to academic achievement. Data included performance on standardized achievement tests and a series of questionnaires administered to superintendents, principals, teachers, and students from 4,000 public schools. Results indicated that socioeconomic class affected student attitude toward school, classroom participation, level of prior knowledge, and time devoted to homework.

**Characteristics of poor schools.** In addition to historical literature specifically linking socioeconomic status and substandard schooling, there is an abundance of literature describing the plight of today's students who attend America's poorest schools (Kozol, 1991). For example, children who attend low SES schools demonstrate lower achievement than their middle and upper class peers. Research suggests that this is due to a variety of factors: fewer financial resources for appropriate educational environments and materials, lower expectations, and school experiences that do not offer the same level of educational opportunities (Books, 2004; Condron & Roscigno, 2003; Gamoran, 2001; Haycock, 2001; Hochschild, 2003; Kozol, 1991).

Another factor that plays a significant role in the education of poor children is the quality of the teachers. Teachers in low SES schools are usually less experienced and often not certified. In every subject area, students in low SES schools are more likely than other students to be taught by teachers without even a minor in the subjects they teach (Haycock, 2001). In addition, teachers are especially likely to leave high-poverty schools, which makes it difficult to develop a sense of community and a shared culture of learning (Hochschild, 2003).

Not only are poor students at risk because of their teachers' ineffectiveness, but they may also be subject to teacher bias. Darley and Gross (1983) conducted an intriguing study with students enrolled in a university course addressing "teacher evaluation methods." Subjects viewed a videotape of a fourth-grade female child and were asked to evaluate her academic capabilities. Half of the participants viewed a sequence that depicted the child in an urban, low-income area and the other half were shown the same child in a middle-class, suburban setting. The subjects in both groups then viewed a videotape of the child taking an academic test. Although the videotaped performance was identical for both groups, the subjects who had information that the child came from a high SES background rated her abilities as well above grade level. The subjects who viewed the student from a low-SES perspective rated her abilities as below grade level. This is especially significant when we consider the fact that most referrals to special education are made by teachers, and referral almost always leads to placement (Ysseldyke, 2001). This chain of events becomes even more disturbing in light of the fact that "in the United States, the special education redesignation rate (the rate at which student have exited special education and returned to general education) is only 4 percent" (Buffum et al., 2010).

In a similar study (Podell & Soodak, 1993), teachers in the field read a case study about a student with academic difficulties and decided whether they would refer the student for special education. In the low-SES condition, subjects read that the boy's father and mother were a security guard and a waitress. In the high-SES condition, the boy's father was described as an executive in a large financial institution and the mother was a sales representative. Teachers

also completed a teacher efficacy scale which summarized their beliefs about their own effectiveness as a teacher, as well as their beliefs about the influence of teachers in general. Podell and Soodak found that student SES and teacher efficacy interact in their influence on referral decisions. When a child with mild learning problems was described as being from a low-SES background, teachers with low personal efficacy were more likely to refer the child for special education. Interestingly, personal efficacy did not influence placement decisions about high-SES children.

Bias may occur early in the special education identification process (Coutinho et al., 2002). At the pre-referral and referral stage, general education teachers may incorrectly assume that students who behave, attend, or learn somewhat differently than White, middle class students are in need of special education services. This type of misperception should not surprise us since our teacher education programs typically do not integrate coursework on special education into the general program (Sapon-Shevin & Zollers, 1999). Special education topics are typically covered in a separate, single course and general education faculty are often not even aware of what is taught in that course.

**Characteristics of rural poverty.** When most people hear statistics about poverty in America, they probably think of inner-city ghettos. Although more than nine million impoverished people live in rural America, we hear little about rural poverty (Books, 1997). Data reveals that the assumption that poverty is an urban problem is misguided. Of the 200 persistently poor counties in the United States, 195 (97.5%) are rural. Of the 66 poorest counties, 59 (89.4%) are rural. In addition, rural Americans in general are poorer than their

urban and suburban counterparts as rural earnings are only 71% of urban earnings (Williams, 2003).

Perceptions about the rural poor are also significantly different from perceptions of the urban poor:

> Popular mythology gives us a picture of the rural poor as self-sufficient farm families content with the pleasures of the simple (and simple-minded) life. Seen apart from this "distorting glass," however, rural poverty would force a closer look at some of the exploitation and injustice that structures United States society and affects its educational practice profoundly. (Books, 1997, p. 74)

Because we view the rural poor through a "distorting glass" and because the rural poor are sparsely distributed over large areas, they are easier to ignore. There is a lack of literature specifically addressing high, poverty rural schools even though children of the rural poor are more likely to be poor than either nonrural children or children in the United States overall (Sherman, 1992).

**Overrepresentation in special education**. Because of the lack of training and knowledge about student differences, teachers often refer students from minority groups and students from lower socioeconomic status for special education services. Researchers have been investigating the phenomenon of over-representation in special education for more than 35 years. In 1968, the population of "educable mentally retarded" (EMR) was classified as follows:

> In my best judgment, about 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by these [special education] teachers are children from low-status backgrounds—including Afro-Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Rican Americans; those from nonstandard English speaking, broken, disorganized and inadequate homes; and children from other nonmiddle class environments. (Dunn, 1968, p. 5)

Unfortunately, the ensuing research focused almost exclusively on the ethnic over-representation, largely ignoring the effects of poverty (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). "We know precious little about the intervening dynamics that connect socioeconomic status to disability" (Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000, p. 192).

From a psychological standpoint, the responses to poor people and poverty by those who are not poor can be described as cognitive and behavioral distancing (Lott, 2002). In other words, psychologists distance themselves and the discipline from the poor by generally ignoring social class as a significant variable in research and theory. Middle-class people tend to respond to issues about poverty with ignorance, because they are largely isolated from and do not personally know poor people. According to Lott (2002), personal beliefs about poor people are reinforced by the media, where the poor are either not presented at all or portrayed as outsiders who are deficient in character or morality. It is common practice for members of Congress and state legislators who shape public policy to communicate stereotypes about the poor. If the comments that have been made about the poor in the political arena were publicly made about a racial group, protests and lawsuits would surely follow (Lott, 2002).

Although overrepresentation in special education is typically studied with race as the dependent variable, the most important reason for educational inequality between Blacks and Whites is socioeconomic (Gamoran, 2001). The median years of schooling among Black and Whites are almost identical (13 years) and racial differences in achievement have diminished over the past 35 years. Based on past trends and the assumption that the American educational system will remain fundamentally stable, data indicates a continuing decline in Black-White racial inequality and a persistent state of educational inequality by socioeconomic background (Gamoran, 2001). Census data confirm that poverty is becoming persistently worse. The number of people in poverty in 2009 (43.6 million) is the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates have been published (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

**Poverty and special education.** The evidence connecting poverty and special education placement is mixed and typically indirect. Increased poverty, for example, is associated with increased rates of Learning Disabilities among Black, Hispanic, and male Asian students (Coutinho et al., 2002). In other words, minority children may be differentially susceptible to LD because of higher poverty rates. The same study, however, found that the results were reversed for White and American Indian students; among these groups, increased poverty was actually associated with lower LD identification rates.

Although the focus of the present study is LD identification, other disability areas also use IQ tests and achievement tests as a basis for identification. One example of the link between special education placement and poverty is the overrepresentation of poor Black students in programs for the mildly mentally retarded (MMR) (Oswald, et al., 1999). For Black

students with MMR, disproportionality worsens with increasing poverty. On the other hand, as poverty increases, fewer Black students are identified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED). The disproportionate representation of Black students as SED is the worst in the wealthiest communities, leading to questions about the tolerance of behavioral diversity in wealthier communities (Oswald, et. al., 1999).

Data from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate that children were at greater risk of disability in single-parent households, that there was no incremental risk associated with racial or ethnic status after controlling for poverty, and that there is a growing relationship between poverty and risk for disability (Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000). The higher disability rate commonly observed among minority children appears to be largely associated with the disproportionate representation of poor and single-parent households in the minority community. In other words, the maldistribution of poverty among minority children assures disproportionate exposure to risk for disability. It is important to note that the focus of this particular study was not on special education placement, but rather the broader population of children with a disability regardless of educational placement.

**Problems with the data.** The reasons for the discrepancies in the data linking special education and poverty may be due, at least in part, to problems with the data being used. Studies that examine disproportionality rely on group data in most cases. For example, a common measure of poverty is the percentage of students in a given school or school district who qualify for free and reduced lunch. While this figure is a commonly accepted measure of poverty, it neglects to tell us which specific students are from low SES backgrounds.

The underlying assumption is that the proportion of different ethnic groups in any category or program should be equal to the proportion of that ethnic group in the general school population if there is no discrimination (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). Many have questioned the ethics and accuracy of this type of calculation. It is especially disconcerting when authors and agencies report different figures for certain groups (Meyer & Patton, 2001). The literature is abundant with data from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR) (Macmillan & Reschly, 1998). OCR surveys do not involve a nationally representative sample of school districts and only includes the 50 largest school districts in the country and a sample of other districts (Macmillan & Reschly, 1998). This problem alone could account for much of the disproportionality reported for minority groups (Macmillan & Reschly, 1998). The 50 largest school districts have a larger proportion of Black students than are in the general population, which could statistically account for the data that reports an overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs.

A critical analysis of the related research indicates that data derived through quantitative means does not necessarily provide a clear picture of what is really happening in schools. Because of the problems with the data described above and the need to provide a deeper, more meaningful description of the situation, I adopted qualitative methods and examined data through some alternative lenses using critical theory.

## Theoretical Framework: Shifting Paradigms

The role of theory in this study is to simplify the data and findings and consider them within a context that makes them easier to understand. Although theory is often viewed as an abstract way of thinking about concrete data, the literature on using theory in qualitative studies supports the use of data to simplify rather than mystify (Walford, 2001). Brookfield (2005) explained the role of theory as:

> nothing more (or less) than a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of some aspect of the world…. Theory is eminently practical. Our actions as people… are often based on understandings we hold about how the world works. The more deliberate and intentional an action is, the more likely it is to be theoretical. To this extent theory is teleological; that is it imbues human actions with purpose. (p. 3)

In other words, theory development is a basic human activity, in which we are constantly creating and refining, in attempts to find what works, and discarding theory when it does not serve a practical purpose (Brookfield, 2005).

Because I see the overrepresentation of students in poverty in special education programs as a social issue, rather than just a school issue, the analysis of this study utilizes critical theory and the transformative paradigm to more deeply explore the experiences of teachers in poor, rural school districts. Critical theory broadly refers to "a school of thought that challenges conventional beliefs and social arrangements" (Rohmann, 1999, p. 81). Critical theorists purport philosophy must be engaged with the great struggles and social movements

of its times (Noddings, 1995). Critical theory recognizes that although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural and political domination. In response to this recognition, critical theorists seek human emancipation in circumstances of domination and oppression. Looking at special education and poverty through the lens of critical theory may provide a more comprehensive and realistic view of the situation as it exists, hence illuminating new ways of instituting meaningful change.

Critical theory is only meaningful when part of a larger process that affects material or institutional change. It starts with the principle that "criticism targets systematic and institutional arrangements, how people create them, and how educators may ameliorate their harmful effects on schools" (Leonardo, p. 13, 2004). Critical theory considers the personal situations of individuals in light of the overall structure of society and the organizations by which they are affected:

> These "impersonal" structures affect actual people in schools and one does not have to look further than Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities* where he describes the degradation that minorities and poor students suffer as a result of racial stratification and capitalism. To borrow a phrase from radical feminism, we can say that the "personal is structural." (Leonardo, p. 13, 2004)

Critical theory serves an appropriate theoretical framework for the current study because it utilizes the personal stories and insights of teachers in the actual situation to analyze the larger social and educational structures that affect their practice.

Critical theory offers people ideas for understanding the ways power, privilege, and injustice affect them. Brookfield (2005) defines critical theory as critical thought that is able to identify, challenge, and change "the process by which a grossly iniquitous society uses dominant ideology to convince people this is a normal state of affairs" (p. viii). According to Brookfield, there are three assumptions supporting critical theory: (1) Western democracies exist with economic, racial and class inequalities; (2) dominant ideology makes these inequalities appear "normal, natural, and inevitable" (p. viii); and (3) people need to understand the reality of inequality in order to change that reality. Ideally, the goal of critical theory results in individual and social change (Brookfield, 2005).

Critical theory provides a lens for looking at poverty, disability, and other issues that society defines as “problems”. Poverty can be viewed as originating “in the inadequacies of its victims or in the pathologies of social institutions” (Edelman, 1988, p. 3). Thinking about poverty through the lens of critical theory involves conducting a serious examination of how and why poverty exists. If people are poor because they are inadequate in some way, solutions focus on education. If people are poor because our economic system places them in a situation where they cannot make a living wage, then solutions focus on socioeconomic reform. How the problem is framed also determines who is responsible for solving it:

> If poverty stems from individual inadequacies, then psychologists, social workers, and educators have a claim to authority in dealing with it; but if an economy that fails to provide enough jobs paying an adequate wage is the source of poverty, then economists have a claim to authority (Edelman, 1988, p. 20).

In the current political climate, American teachers are held accountable for fixing the poverty problem (Rothstein, 2008).

Teachers are charged with "closing the achievement gap" existing between White, middle class students and low-income and students of color. It is important for them to accept the challenge to bring all students to the same academic standards because they do not want to be seen as "making excuses" (Rothstein, 2008). Although teachers see how poor health or family economic stress influence students' learning:

> Teachers may nowadays be intimidated from acknowledging these realities aloud and in groupthink obedience, repeat the mantra the "all children can learn." But nobody is fooled. Teachers still know that although all children can learn, some learn less well because of poorer health or less-secure homes. Suppressing such truths leads only to teacher cynicism and disillusion. (Rothstein, 2008, p. 10)

Rothstein encourages society to take a critical look at the current political rhetoric in light of what we know about poverty and learning.

One conclusion based on critical theory is that members of society embrace certain "myths" regarding people in poverty that support classism (Gorski, 2008). These myths include statements such as: "Poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics…Poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education…Poor people are linguistically deficient…Poor people tend to abuse drugs and alcohol" (Gorski, 2008, p. 33-34). According to Edelman (1977), "A 'myth' is not necessarily a fiction. The term signifies a widely accepted belief that gives meaning to events and that is socially cued, whether or not

it is verifiable" (p. 3). In other words, socialization conditions people to accept certain beliefs about people living in poverty, the role of government and education, and principles related to other political issues. These ideas may be viewed as fact because conditioned ideas make it easier to understand the world and no other explanations have been offered (Edelman, 1977). In reality, privileged individuals in our society benefit from the mass acceptance of certain myths (Edelman, 1977).

**Transformative Paradigm: Applying Critical Theory**

The transformative paradigm is an example of the application of critical theory. People with disabilities have been viewed through various lenses throughout history. The moral model, which is the oldest historical model, suggests that the disability represents a punishment for a sin or a means of inspiring or redeeming others (Gill, 1999). In other words, the person with the disability or their family has committed a moral transgression for which "God" or "the spirits" are disciplining them (Gill, 1999).

The medical model describes disability as a problem or a measurable defect located in the individual needing a cure provided by experts (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). Seelman (2000) described a new paradigm calling for a shift in the location of the problem from within the individual to the environmental response to the disability. Within this "transformative paradigm," disability is socially constructed and derives its meaning from society's response to individuals who deviate from cultural standards (Seelman, 2000).

The transformative paradigm places central focus on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups, such as women, ethnic/racial minorities, people with disabilities, and

those who are poor (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). A transformative paradigm for research is emerging to change the view of disability from a person-centered defect or characteristic to a personal circumstance occurring as a result of a marginalized experience from environmentally-created conditions such as poverty (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

Several researchers (Boykin, 2000; Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995) have contributed to the philosophical assumptions underlying the transformative paradigm. Swadner and Lubeck (1995) state that the deficit model emphasizes "getting the child ready for school, rather than getting the school ready to serve increasingly diverse children" (p. 18). Boykin (2000) suggests that because factors outside the child place the child at risk, the terms "children at risk" should be changed to "children placed at risk." The transformative paradigm is described by Mertens and McLaughlin as "contextual, experiential, involved, socially relevant, multimethodological, and inclusive of emotions and events as experienced" (p. 3).

The literature on critical theory and the transformative paradigm provide the basis for examining the data collected for the current study. The goal of critical research as applied to this study is "to create political debate and discussion to empower people to take action, to bring about change in existing social structures…" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 9).

## Chapter Summary

The review of the literature related to the identification of learning disabilities, the role of social class in American education, and the theoretical framework for considering these issues through the lenses of critical theory and the transformative paradigm offered a

conceptual framework for conducting my study. In the first section I presented a discussion of the issues surrounding LD identification. The review of scholarly literature illustrated the complexity of LD identification, a persistent issue occurring since the concept of learning disabilities was first introduced in the 1960s.

The definition of LD continues to be controversial, which leads to misidentification and inconsistency in diagnosis. The Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), requires that assessment materials used for evaluation and placement of children with disabilities must be chosen and administered so as not to be racially or culturally discriminatory. Both federal law and most state regulations also mandate that socioeconomic status not influence special education placement decisions (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The current review of literature indicates that these mandates have not been effective in eliminating overrepresentation of certain groups in many areas of special education (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

I also described the most current revision of special education law (IDEA 2004) which presents a new method for LD identification, Response to Intervention (RTI). The review of literature provided an overview of how RTI addresses LD identification using progress monitoring and includes a series of increasingly intense interventions to meet the needs of struggling students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This is contrasted with the traditional IQ-Achievement discrepancy model that utilizes standardized tests to determine eligibility and has been deemed a “wait to fail” procedure (Lyon et al., 2001).

I presented theoretical literature to examine the discourse used to describe learning disabilities and the assumptions of a deficit model. Both the medicalization of learning disabilities and labeling deviance theory are presented as alternate lenses for considering LD identification.

In the second major section of Chapter Two, I explore the literature relative to the role of social class in American education. An historical context is provided as well as scholarly literature that describes the characteristics of poor schools and the unique traits specific to rural poverty. I briefly summarize the research describing the issue of overrepresentation in special education, pointing out that there is a lack of literature addressing the specific relationship between poverty and overrepresentation in special education. This gap in the research presents an opportunity for exploration in the current study.

The chapter concludes with, the theoretical framework for the study being established within the literature on critical theory and the transformative paradigm. Critical theory challenges scholars to examine traditional beliefs and social arrangements. Critical theory also offers people ideas for understanding the ways power, privilege, and injustice affect them. Critical theory and the transformative paradigm provide a lens for extending the view of both disability and poverty beyond conventional ways of thinking.

This literature review was completed in order to develop a framework for understanding the LD identification process and the effects of poverty on education. The literature provides an understanding of the topics relevant to the current study and also distinguishes what has been and still needs to be learned about LD identification in the context

of high-poverty rural settings. In addition, the literature provides the theoretical framework for analyzing the data.

Conducting the literature review led to a more refined understanding of how to develop appropriate methodology and how to interpret the findings of the study within the larger body of research. The literature review indicated that LD identification is an area of contention that warrants further examination. In addition, the review of literature on social class revealed that poverty is an issue that is highly relevant in schools, yet has not been significantly studied relative to LD identification. The literature review revealed this to be especially true for high-poverty rural settings. Teachers have been identified as highly critical components of children's success in school (Haycock, 2001; Hochschild, 2003), yet their voices have not been widely revealed in the literature. This study focused on the voices of teachers in a high-poverty rural school, particularly their beliefs and perceptions surrounding LD identification and poverty.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how teachers in one high-poverty rural school district make LD identification decisions. I designed the study in order to examine how teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions. Several subquestions were adopted to investigate the study question, including (1) What beliefs do teachers hold about poverty and how it affects their students? (2) What do teachers believe about their role in a high-poverty setting? and (3) How do teachers determine if a child has a learning disability or if other factors (such as poverty) are contributing to their academic difficulties?

This chapter provides a description of the methodology used to address the research questions. The discussion includes: (1) rationale for the use of a qualitative case study approach, (2) description of the setting where the research was conducted, (3) descriptions of the participants in the aggregate and individually, (4) overview of research design, (5) methods of data collection and analysis, and (6) significance and limitations of the study. The concluding section of this chapter summarizes the general approaches used in this case study.

## Rationale for Qualitative Case Study Approach

A qualitative approach was used to learn more about how teachers in high-poverty rural schools make decisions about disability status. Qualitative researchers do not approach research with a particular hypothesis to be proven or disproven, but examine complex topics in the context in which they occur (Merriam, 1998). Most qualitative research projects attempt to

understand the complexities of the situation under investigation rather than to provide a strict definition or interpretation of the construct in question (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

Part of the rationale for using a qualitative approach is that qualitative studies are needed in order to truly understand what is happening in schools, particularly in the area of special education. The status quo in the field of special education research has been quantitative (McPhail, 1995; Schnorr, 1995; Shen, 1997). The discipline of special education has come to accept and undertake the practice of qualitative research methodology much more slowly and reluctantly than the field of educational research as a whole. Although qualitative studies now appear in journals such as *Remedial and Special Education, Learning Disability Quarterly,* and *Exceptional Children*, the works tend to reflect a narrowly defined application of the qualitative paradigm, as described in Chapter One.

Qualitative studies in the area of special education have done the important work of telling the stories of individuals with disabilities and advocating for and addressing disability-related issues, but typically focus on disability in isolation, rather than considering issues such as race and class as important contextual variables (Pugach, 2001). Pugach contends that qualitative research is ideal for studying overrepresentation in its full context and believes researchers should be using the paradigm to locate the voices of disability with the voices of groups oppressed because of race, class, culture, or language. I have accepted Pugach's challenge by using qualitative methods to examine individual voices within the larger context of poverty and schooling. I conducted a case study of Gilligan (pseudonym), a high-poverty rural school district in a Midwestern state. The names of all people and places have been changed in

an effort to maintain anonymity. I have focused on analyzing the voices of 11 individuals who teach in this setting on a daily basis. The methodology included semi-structured interviews, detailed observations of the setting, and a review of online documents to secure data about the school district and the community.

I focused on teachers' voices for a number of reasons. Teachers are in the unique position of seeing what happens every day in the classroom. They know what policy and procedure states about how education is designed to work, and they have first-hand experience in how the implementation of policy actually occurs. I am also interested in teachers' perspectives because I am in a professional position to instruct future teachers and share the stories with them. Future teachers tend to be interested in stories that tell about what is happening in "real" classrooms. Finally, as a teacher, it was easier for me to relate to the participants and establish rapport.

Qualitative research is the optimum choice for answering the research questions because it focuses on the participants' experiences and words. It describes and analyzes the meaning the participants assign to their unique experiences with the researcher operating as the instrument for data collection. Findings materialize as themes or categories rather than numerical data, and deep description communicates the results of the research (Merriam, 1998). This study is specifically suited for qualitative research because I am interested in examining the experiences of the teachers from their own perspectives within a very specific context. True to the qualitative paradigm, this study presents a rich description of the teachers' stories told from their frame of reference. The themes that emerge are not statistically

supportable because statistical or mathematical truth is not the goal of qualitative research. The qualitative researcher trusts that the data he or she uncovers is accurate for the given subject within the given context and ascertains what lessons can be learned from that data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

Within the qualitative paradigm, I selected a case study approach. As I reflected upon the best way to pursue the research questions, a case study emerged as the most authentic method for gathering the data that I was interested in exploring. A review of the methodological literature revealed that case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2008). Case studies also focus on society and culture in a group, a program, or an organization and take the reader into the setting with a vividness and detail typically not present in other types of analytic reporting formats (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because this study met all of these criteria, a case study emerged as the most appropriate framework.

Within the case study paradigm, sample size affects the type of data collected. I selected a sample size of one school district with 11 participants within that district in order to develop a richer, cultural description of the context. I selected Gilligan (pseudonym) for the study because it had high numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch and it was located in a rural setting. Gilligan was an ideal choice because I had professional connections that gave me access to the site, yet I was able to maintain an acceptable level of objectivity because I did not have any emotional connections to Gilligan prior to commencing the study.

By focusing on one school district, I was able to hear the voices of general education teachers in addition to special education teachers. Because general education teachers are important participants in the special education process, including them increased the authenticity of the findings.

## Context

Case studies typically present a more vivid and detailed description of the setting than what is usually present in other types of studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As such, the setting is central to this study. To develop a deep understanding of the case, I spent time driving the streets of Gilligan and the country roads surrounding Gilligan. Data about the setting was collected as I walked the halls of the Gilligan schools, observed and listened during staff meetings, and interviewed teachers. The following section includes a description of the school district of Gilligan and the town of Gilligan. I also provide a brief narrative depicting some of the surrounding towns and cities that have significant impacts on Gilligan's traits and culture.

### The Town of Gilligan

"Gilligan, [State]: A Window to a Place Seemingly Unchanged by Time" boasts the website featuring this small town (http://www.[gilligan.st.]com/). Gilligan is a town with a total population of 1,410. According to statistics found on its website, Gilligan's "urban population" is 0, its rural population is 1,410 (three farm, 1,407 nonfarm). I had driven through Gilligan on

numerous occasions prior to commencing this study, but tried to approach it as an outsider in the role of researcher.

The town of Gilligan clusters along a state highway which passes directly through it. The most prominent building is a large shop that features handmade Amish goods. The citizens of Gilligan rarely shop here, but people travel to Gilligan to tour the Amish farms in the area and then purchase Amish furniture, quilts, and other handicrafts at the store. One non-Amish capitalist has turned Gilligan into a tourist center for people enamored with the "simple" lifestyle of the Amish. Around this main shop, a few smaller shops have sprung up. All of the shops appear to cater to visitors rather than locals. In addition to the tourist shops, there is a small grocery store, a drive-in root beer stand that is only open in the summer, a public library, and a couple of small taverns and cafes. There are also empty shops and buildings that once housed businesses that never quite made it. All of the buildings described thus far appear to be at least 100 years old. One of the newer buildings in town is a gas station with a franchise sub sandwich shop attached.

The residential area of Gilligan clusters around all sides of this main thoroughfare. The houses are mostly single-family dwellings built in 1939 or earlier. The median value for a house in Gilligan is less than half the average home price for the state. In 2007, the median household income in Gilligan was $31,330 compared to a state average of $50,578 (http://www.city-data.com/city/[Gilligan-State.]html). Approximately half of Gilligan's students live in the residential area within the village limits with the other half living in the surrounding rural countryside. The country homes are scattered randomly among the gently rolling hills,

swamps, and forestland that encircle Gilligan. Although the countryside is beautiful, many of the homes are rundown farmhouses or trailer houses with inadequate plumbing and insulation.

Interspersed among the homes of the Gilligan students are numerous farms belonging to members of the Old Order Amish. Driving the bus routes of the Gilligan school district, one encounters just as many horse-drawn conveyances as motorized vehicles. While the members of the Amish community run their own country schools with their own teachers, their presence is obvious on the roadways and in the businesses of Gilligan.

**Gilligan Schools**

The Gilligan Elementary School and Gilligan Middle/High School are located on the same campus on the west end of town. The school buildings are outside the town of Gilligan along the highway which means that both "town" students and "country" students are transported by bus each day. The land immediately surrounding the school grounds is open field with a few scattered clumps of trees. The facilities appeared to be more than adequate for their purpose with the high school boasting an indoor swimming pool and the elementary school surrounded by the usual collection of playground equipment. Outward appearances of the schools alone would not indicate that this is a high-poverty school district.

**Gilligan Elementary School.** Prior to commencing this study I had visited Gilligan Elementary School as a substitute teacher and later as a university supervisor for student teachers. I was familiar with the building and knew a couple of the younger teachers because they had taken my classes at the university.

The first day I visited the schools was extremely cold, hovering around 0 degrees with wind chills well below 0. There were not many cars in the lot, presumably because it was an inservice day meaning that no students were on campus. On the edge of the shared parking lot was a large plastic statue of a beaver that stands 15 to 20 feet tall with a sign proclaiming "Gilligan Beavers" that seems like it belongs in front of a tourist museum in a north woods small town rather than in front of a school building.

I first stopped in the Gilligan Elementary School office to let them know I was present and to find out where to find Tracy who was going to introduce me to some of the teachers who had agreed to participate in the study. I stood in the office listening to a young teacher talking to the two secretaries who were seated at desks. They were chatting about the weather and the re-modeling projects that the young teacher and her husband were engaged in at an old farm house they had recently purchased. This provided a unique opportunity to observe an informal exchange between staff members and get a feel for the culture of the school.

When the ladies realized that someone was standing there waiting, one of them said, "Oh, sorry about that. Can we help you? Here we are, gabbing on and on and making you stand there and wait." I introduced myself and the young teacher quickly introduced herself as Mackenzie and volunteered to help find Tracy. Mackenzie seemed energetic, friendly, and young. She chatted with me as we walked through the school. She was not exactly sure where Tracy was, but found her in the computer lab with about a dozen other teachers. A technology training session had just ended and the teachers were working on the computers and talking to each other. The noise level was high with lots of laughter and informal conversation.

Tracy introduced me to the women sitting near her, Mary Ann being one of them. Tentative plans were made for an interview later that morning. Then Tracy took me to additional classrooms to meet some of the teachers and to set up potential interview dates and times. E-mail addresses were exchanged for future communication. The climate was friendly, yet professional.

Although Gilligan Elementary School has a significantly high level of poverty, there was no visible evidence that the building was in disrepair. The classrooms looked neat and clean and well-equipped for teaching. There were no bare light bulbs or leaking ceilings like those described in Kozol's (1991) study of high-poverty urban schools. Gilligan Elementary School looked like a typical suburban school in the Midwest, but it was surrounded by farmers' fields rather than a neighborhood of vinyl-clad houses.

**Gilligan High School.** Later in the afternoon of the same inservice day, I entered Gilligan High School for the first time. The students did not have school, but the teachers reported to work for meetings, technology training opportunities, and time to work in their classrooms. There was flexibility for getting some much-needed work time and a chance to connect and collaborate with colleagues.

Entering Gilligan High School shortly after noon, I noticed how quiet and dark it was. There was no one in the office which is highly unusual in school settings. I wandered through the halls taking note of the layout of the building. The main entrance opened directly into a large cafeteria with the office off to one side and doors labeled "Auditorium" directly opposite it. Four main hallways of classrooms were located beyond the cafeteria. Because the students

were already gone, the echo of footsteps was all that could be heard. There were displays of wildlife taxidermy proudly exhibited throughout the building, many which boasted a nameplate recognizing the hunter who had brought down the trophy.

I followed the sound of laughing voices and the aroma of homemade food to a large classroom where the high school staff was hosting a shower for one of the teachers who was expecting a baby. The celebration was just coming to an end and everyone was cleaning up and preparing to move to the library for the staff meeting. I spotted Joyce, a known participant, talking to another teacher near the door and she came over to say hello and to let me know that the meeting would be starting in the library in few minutes. She explained that she would be there shortly, but needed to retrieve a few items from her classroom first.

When I entered the library there were a few people starting to settle into chairs clustered around tables. There was a middle-aged, slight woman who appeared to be preparing to convene the meeting. She introduced herself as the high school principal. She offered to let me take a few minutes to discuss my research and ask for volunteers. This offer was gratefully accepted.

As the library filled with middle and high school teachers I noted that almost all of the men sat in one area of the room while the women clustered at tables on the other end. There was one male teacher sitting with a group of females. This teacher later came to be known as Dan, the only male from the middle or high school who agreed to participate in my study.

The meeting itself consisted of a few brief announcements by the principal and the superintendent, followed by a discussion of some very specific students of concern. Dan was a

very active participant in this conversation. He was asked his opinion in a couple of cases and volunteered input on others. The staff was most concerned about which students would be able to meet graduation requirements by May. I noted the willingness of the staff to use student names and discuss sensitive issues with an unknown person present.

Following the meeting, several teachers stopped to ask about the study and to give their names and contact information so that interview dates could be arranged. A couple of the teachers asked if I could stay and interview them that afternoon as they had some time in their schedule.

Impressions of the climate of Gilligan High School included the observation that it was similar to other small, rural high schools with which I was familiar. Some of the teachers were open and friendly, others appeared more reserved. The teachers who did not volunteer for the study are probably qualitatively different from the participants interviewed in their beliefs and perceptions, which is one limitation of the study.

**Neighboring Communities**

To truly understand Gilligan, it is important to possess some background knowledge about the neighboring communities and their characteristics. This section provides a brief description of the nearby cities of Mainland and Cedar Creek where many of Gilligan's teachers live and raise their own children.

**Mainland.** Mainland, with a population of over 65,000 is 20 miles west of Gilligan. Mainland houses a state university campus, a shopping mall, movie theaters, car dealerships, restaurants, two hospitals, and other amenities not available in a small town like Gilligan. Many

of the teachers in the Gilligan School District graduated from the university in Mainland and approximately half of the teaching staff lives in Mainland, commuting to Gilligan each day. Mainland is comprised of middle class neighborhoods and high-poverty areas, with free and reduced lunch rates ranging from 0 to 77 percent.

**Cedar Creek.** Halfway between Mainland and Gilligan is Cedar Creek, a community with a population of 1,236. Driving through Cedar Creek on the same state highway that runs through Gilligan, my initial observations were similar. Cedar Creek is about the same size as Gilligan, but does not appear to have the same level of tourist interest. There are one or two small craft and antique shops, a public library, a taxidermy shop, and two gas stations, one of which also houses a convenience store. Unlike Gilligan, there is no grocery store on the main street. An abandoned grocery store on a side street is closed due to lack of business. The schools are not visible from the main highway but the elementary, middle, and high school are all housed on one campus two blocks south of the main road.

Outward appearances do not distinguish the Gilligan and Cedar Creek school districts as being qualitatively different, but the free and reduced lunch rates tell a different story. In Gilligan, 58 percent of the elementary school students receive free/reduced lunch, 50 percent of the middle school students, and 39 percent of the high school students. Cedar Creek's free and reduced lunch rates reflect a much higher socioeconomic status with only 16 percent of the elementary school students, 22 percent of the middle school students, and 18 percent of the high school students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The similarities and differences between Gilligan and Cedar Creek are noted because they present an interesting example of

the “haves” and the “have nots” that define this particular context. Their close physical proximity, almost identical geographical features, and similar population size seem to imply that they would possess similar community and school cultures.

During the course of the interviews, some of the Gilligan teachers speculated about the socioeconomic differences and what it means for schools and teachers. Some of their insights on this topic are included in the analysis chapter of this document.

**The Participants**

Research reveals that high-poverty schools are more likely to employ inexperienced teachers who are less qualified than their counterparts in middle class settings (Haycock, 2001). In addition, teachers are especially likely to leave high-poverty schools, which makes it difficult to develop a sense of community and a shared culture of learning (Hochschild, 2003). Gilligan’s teachers, however, did not exemplify these characteristics. In Gilligan, 36 percent of the teachers have Master’s degrees or higher and 81 percent of the teachers have at least five years teaching experience (http://www.education.com/schoolfinder/us/[state]/district/[gilligan]-school-district/). These statistics are representative of the participants in the study with four of the 11 teachers (36 percent) holding Master’s degrees and nine of the 11 teachers (81.8 percent) having at least five years teaching experience.

Of the 11 teachers interviewed for this study, five were general education teachers and six were special education teachers. I interviewed seven elementary school teachers and four secondary (middle school/high school) teachers. Gender balance was not possible with nine

females and only two males volunteering their time and ideas. The ages of the participants ranged from mid-20s to late 50s, with years of teaching experience ranging from one to 28. It is significant that ten of the 11 participants self-identified their socioeconomic background as middle class, with the final participant describing her socioeconomic background as both poverty and middle class. It is interesting to note that only three of the 11 teachers report their current residence as Gilligan. Four of the 11 teachers have never taught anywhere other than Gilligan, and only two of the 11 participants have taught in urban settings. These factors may impact their impressions and beliefs regarding the situation at Gilligan. A summary of the participants' characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Summary of Participant Characteristics*

| **Participants** | **Position** | **Age** | **Current Residence** | **Socioeconomic Background** | **Rural vs. Non-rural Background** | **Teaching Experience** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mary Ann | 3rd grade | 39 | Cedar Creek | Middle Class | Rural | 4 years urban<br>9 years Gilligan |
| Dan | Secondary math and science | 42 | Mainland | Middle Class | Rural | 6 years Gilligan |
| Steve | Elementary special education | 30 | Mainland | Middle Class | Suburban | 1 year other rural<br>4 years Gilligan |
| Kay | 4th grade | 35 | Gilligan | Middle Class | Rural (Cedar Creek) | 3 years other rural<br>8 years Gilligan |
| Polly | Speech and Language | 52 | Gilligan | Middle Class | Suburban and urban | 28 years Gilligan |
| Mackenzie | Elementary special education | 25 | Gilligan | Middle Class | Rural (Gilligan) | 3 years other rural<br>1 year Gilligan |
| Tracy | Elementary special education | 25 | Mainland | Middle Class | Rural or suburban | 1 year Gilligan |
| Kathy | 1st grade | 42 | Cedar Creek | Middle Class | Suburban | 3 years urban,<br>7 years other rural<br>1 year Gilligan |
| Dana | Secondary math and science | 28 | Mainland | Middle Class | Suburban | 5 years Gilligan |
| Joyce | Middle school special education | 50 | Rural (not Gilligan) | Middle Class | Rural | 8 years Gilligan |
| Amber | High school special education | 28 | Rural (not Gilligan) | Poverty and Middle Class | Rural | 3 years other rural<br>3 years Gilligan |

The most important characteristics of the participants cannot be summarized in a table. All of the participants in this study provided evidence that they are professionals who care about the children they teach and are dedicated to helping them achieve success. Their unique outlooks and personalities are what make them exceptional. The following sections provide an introduction to each of the participants. In order to place the data within a meaningful context it is imperative to know who these teachers are as professionals and individuals. Their beliefs about poverty and special education identification can only be examined relative to their professional and personal backgrounds. As noted earlier, these backgrounds are based primarily on middle class experiences.

This section provides significantly more detail about the participants than what is encountered in many studies. Information about the participants' backgrounds and experiences contributes to a deeper understanding of their responses to specific interview questions. Because this is a qualitative case study with a small number of participants, information about their backgrounds and experiences contributes to a deeper understanding of their responses to specific interview questions.

**Mary Ann**

Mary Ann is a third grade teacher in her early 40s who grew up in a rural area not far from Gilligan. Mary Ann was one of the few participants who had extensive experience working in urban school settings. When she first graduated from college with an elementary teaching degree, she taught fourth grade in an inner-city school in Houston, Texas for a couple of years. After leaving Houston, Mary Ann spent two years teaching third graders in Chicago before she

moved to Gilligan. As Mary Ann pointed out, "When you first get out of college you kind of want to get out and do something different, but then it's nice to get back closer to home." It was evident that Mary Ann sees herself as a "country girl" rather than a "city girl." At the time of the interview, Mary Ann had been teaching in the Gilligan School District for nine years, six years in the middle school and three in her current third grade classroom. She classified all of her teaching settings as high poverty, but described her own background as middle class.

**Dan**

Dan is a highly energetic middle school and high school science and math teacher. He is the only male teacher from the middle/high school setting who volunteered for the study. According to Dan, "This is where I've always taught." His six years of teaching experience have all occurred in Gilligan. In fact, half of his student teaching semester was also spent in Gilligan. Dan's only other experiences with school are his own education and nine weeks of student teaching in another placement. Dan attended a high school of about 1,000 students in a town with a population of 14,000. Dan grew up on a farm, so he is familiar with rural life. Dan describes his own background as middle class. Dan lives in Mainland with his wife, Dana, who also participated in this study.

**Steve**

Steve is a serious young man who teaches special education at Gilligan Elementary School. At the time of the interview, Steve was on a one-year leave of absence to take care of his infant son while his wife, Sara, returned to her special education teaching position in Mainland. Steve and his family live in Mainland. Prior to this study, I visited Steve's classroom

as a university supervisor for some of the student teachers he had hosted during his four years at Gilligan. At the time of the interview he was still trying to make a decision about returning to his position at Gilligan. He was considering options outside the field of education, but stated, "If I go back to teaching, it will definitely be in [Gilligan]." Steve grew up in a household that was middle class.

**Kay**

Kay is a fourth grade teacher at Gilligan Elementary School who had just completed her Master's degree. Kay's teaching experience includes three years teaching second grade students in Woodville, a rural school that did was not high-poverty. Following her time at Woodville, Kay moved to Gilligan where she spent one year teaching second grade and seven years teaching fourth. Because of this experience, Kay had first-hand knowledge about a rural, high-poverty school and a rural, non-poverty school. Kay lives in the Gilligan School District and feels that this is an important aspect of teaching in the school. Kay grew up in Cedar Valley, which is rural, but not high poverty. She reports her own personal upbringing as middle class.

**Polly**

Polly definitely considers herself an insider to the community and school district of Gilligan. Polly is a lively speech-language pathologist who is direct and concise in her responses. When asked about her professional career, she replied, "Twenty-eight years here in [Gilligan]." Polly was positive and upbeat about the Gilligan School District, her colleagues, and her building administrator. She acknowledged the difference between her own upbringing in suburban and urban settings that were not high poverty and the situation at Gilligan. Polly and her family are

local residents of Gilligan and enjoy being part of the community. Her own son is a graduate of Gilligan and secured a "great job" after completing an engineering degree at the state university.

**Mackenzie**

Mackenzie was born and raised in Gilligan, but her own personal circumstances were self-reported as middle class. She graduated from Gilligan High School in 2000 and went on to Mainland University to obtain her teaching certification. For three years, Mackenzie taught special education in a high-poverty, rural school 90 miles from Gilligan and was happy to secure a special education teaching position at Gilligan Elementary School for the 2008-2009 school year. Mackenzie works with students in grades three through five who have Learning Disabilities and Cognitive Disabilities. She made several comments that her limited experience really did not prepare her to answer many of the interview questions. For Mackenzie, being an insider has its benefits and drawbacks. Community members are more likely to openly share their criticisms of the system, which puts Mackenzie in the awkward position of trying to defend herself and her profession.

**Tracy**

Tracy is also a special education teacher in Gilligan Elementary School. She is in her mid-20s and lives in Mainland. Tracy was initially hired as a part-time special education teacher for students in Kindergarten through grade 2. Since her graduation from college in 2005, Tracy has spent most of her time substitute teaching and working on graduate level courses that will allow her to add an additional special education certification in the area of Emotional-

Behavioral Disabilities. Tracy was raised in a rural area near the state capital. Although the poverty rate was not as high as Gilligan's, Tracy estimated that about half of the students with whom she went to school were at the lower end of the socioeconomic class. She reported that the other half of the students had parents who were professionals who commuted to the state capital for employment. Tracy described her own background as middle class.

**Kathy**

Kathy is an experienced teacher in her early forties, but it is her first year teaching in the Gilligan School District. It is also her first year teaching first graders. Kathy started her teaching career as a high school special education teacher in a middle class, urban setting in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Kathy then taught special education in a rural high school that was "high poverty, but not as poor as Gilligan." She also taught in a small community that had "a good mix of all socioeconomic levels." Kathy and her family live in Cedar Valley. She described her own background as middle class. Kathy is taking graduate courses to extend her licensure. She takes her teaching career very seriously, spending extra time looking at classroom data and trying to find interventions that work well for her students.

**Dana**

Dana was in her mid-20s and in her fifth year of teaching middle school math and science at the time of the interview. She started her teaching career with an internship in Gilligan and envisions herself teaching there for a long time. Dana is married to Dan, who is also a participant in the present study. Dana and Dan were expecting their first child together at the time of the study. Dana was born and raised in the small town of Eastland which borders

the eastern side of Mainland. Eastland is larger than Gilligan and is sometimes considered a suburb of Mainland. Although Eastland has some students living in poverty, Dana's own upbringing was middle class. Dana and Dan live in Mainland and plan to send their child to school in the Mainland School District.

**Joyce**

Joyce is a very caring and nurturing special education teacher who enjoys working with her middle school students. Joyce commutes from a nearby rural town that is not high-poverty. She describes her own background as middle class. Joyce is in her late forties and returned to school to become a social worker in her mid-thirties. She decided that becoming a special education teacher was a more appropriate career for her. Joyce talked about baking cookies, teaching kids how to play board games, inviting people to bring their dogs to visit her classroom, and other fun activities that she uses to connect with her students. She is a strong believer that meeting students' physical and emotional needs is a prerequisite to working on academic tasks.

**Amber**

When the students with special needs leave Joyce's nurturing environment and enter the high school, they receive special education support from Amber. Amber is in her sixth year of teaching and commutes to Gilligan from a rural town that is not high-poverty. The first three years of her career she taught in a different rural school that had a much higher socioeconomic status than Gilligan. For the last three years she has held her current position as the high school teacher for students with learning disabilities and emotional-behavioral disabilities at

Gilligan High School. While Joyce provides a very relaxed and calming environment for her students, Amber is intense. Joyce and Amber both share a passion for their students and their work, but their enthusiasm presents quite differently. Amber shared that she grew up in poverty but that her parents were always supportive of her earning a college degree. This support of higher education could be considered a middle class value even though Amber's family did not have sufficient financial resources. Amber views her own background as similar to her students' lives in many ways and holds her students to high standards. She refers to her approach as "tough love." For Amber, the academic success of her students is critical.

## Overview of Research Design

The research design is summarized in the following list. Each item on the list is explained is more detail in subsequent sections:

1. Prior to data collection, a review of the literature was conducted to establish research already completed regarding the identification of learning disabilities, the discourse surrounding learning disabilities, and the role of social class in American education. The literature review also provided a theoretical framework for the study.
2. I defended a research proposal and then secured permission from the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the rights of human subjects were protected. The IRB was also provided with written permission from the case site school district.

3. Potential research participants were contacted by e-mail. Additional participants were recruited using a snowballing technique, including an informational statement I made at a staff meeting.
4. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 teachers from the elementary, middle, and high school settings. I also made observations throughout this process and recorded them in field notes.
5. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using a combination of qualitative software, researcher coding, and peer review. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy.

**Literature Review**

The review of literature began prior to beginning the study and continued throughout the research process. The main topics for review included LD identification, LD discourse, and the role of socioeconomic status in education. The review also included theoretical literature relative to critical theory and the transformative paradigm. This review provided the theoretical framework for the study.

**Institutional Review Board Approval and Ethical Considerations**

Following the literature review, I developed and successfully defended a proposal for this study. Based on the input of the committee members, I revised the study and submitted paperwork to the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board. The Institutional Review Board gave approval for the study because it meets certain ethical requirements related to the protection of participants. Although there were no serious threats anticipated for participants,

I provided safeguards including a thorough informed consent process, the use of pseudonyms throughout the study, and secure storage of research-related documents and recordings.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection included a review of online documents to obtain background and statistical information about the community and school district, interviews of special education and general education teachers, and observations of the community as well as field notes. Data was collected during January and February of 2009.

Initial phone calls and e-mail contacts were made with district and building administrators to secure permission for the study. Participants received documents submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of St. Thomas so that they were aware of the scope and intent of the study. School district administration granted written permission on school district letterhead prior to the commencement of the study.

Because of my professional associations and personal contacts, I initially made contact with some of the participants via e-mail. Steve was one of the cooperating teachers who worked with my student teachers in the past. Prior to the study, Steve and I had a number of informal conversations about teaching special education in a high-poverty, rural school. Although Steve was taking a one-year leave of absence to care for his newborn son, he was still interested in participating in the study and agreed to participate in an interview.

In addition to knowing Steve and Joyce from student teaching observations, I also knew Steve and Tracy as former university students in my courses. The remainder of the participants were recruited using a snowballing technique. Tracy not only agreed to participate in the study,

but also immediately recruited colleagues. Five of the seven elementary school teachers were referred to me by Tracy. When I contacted Joyce, she mentioned a teacher inservice day that was approaching and put me in contact with the middle/high school principal. The principal invited me to attend a staff meeting on the inservice day. At the inservice meeting, the teachers were introduced to me and a sign-up sheet was distributed for individuals who were interested in further information.

Immediately following the inservice meeting, several teachers who were interested in the study approached me and established a reasonable time and place for the interviews. Each individual was provided with a copy of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) which they were encouraged to read prior to the interview. Dan, Dana, and Amber were all recruited from this inservice meeting. There were two additional volunteers who decided not to participate due to lack of time for the interview.

At the beginning of each interview I explained the potential benefits and risks to each participant and explained how each participant's rights would be protected during the study, including the use of pseudonyms to protect individual identity and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were given a second copy of the Informed Consent Form and given an opportunity to ask questions before deciding if they would sign the form. All participants signed the consent form prior to being interviewed.

Throughout the interviews I maintained a stance of friendly participant observer (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Because I have background as a teacher in a high-poverty rural school district, establishing the rapport of an "insider" was achieved to some extent, yet it was clear

that I was not truly a member of the community. Based on my observations and past experience, I believe that all participants were open and honest in their responses.

I used a semi-structured interview format, working from a set of open-ended questions but allowing the conversations to go where the participants led. Sometimes the questions led to other topics that the participants felt were relevant to their experience. A list of the interview questions is included in Appendix B.

With each participant's permission, the interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. Following each interview session the audio files were transferred to my personal computer which could only be accessed with a secure password. The files were then deleted from the recording device to increase the security of the data. I personally transcribed all interviews and saved the documents in locked files on a personal computer which could only be accessed by me. Participants were given the option of reviewing their transcribed interview to verify accuracy, but all of them declined this option. When hard copies of the data were printed for analysis, the paperwork was secured in a locked safe in my home. All recordings and transcripts were only accessible to me and my dissertation advisor, Dr. Thomas L. Fish, and have been used solely for the purposes of the dissertation. Future use of the data may include subsequent publications and presentations to college classes, professional meetings and conferences. Audio recordings will be retained one year beyond the defense of the dissertation and then destroyed. Transcripts will be retained for other research.

I was intentionally respectful of the participants' time because teachers' schedules are busy. Most interviews were concluded within 45 minutes, although Dan's interview was significantly longer at 72 minutes. Participants were interviewed at times and places identified as convenient by each individual. All of the teachers, with the exception of Steve, invited me to interview them in their classrooms when the students were not present (i.e., after school or on an inservice day). Because Steve was not currently teaching, I interviewed him at my home. All interviews were taped using a digital recorder. I transcribed the interviews, inserting observer's comments regarding body language, setting, mood, voice, or other elements that aided in the understanding of the transcribed words of the participants.

I reviewed the transcribed interviews and sorted the teachers' own words into general categories. These categories were used to analyze the data using the NVivo Software Program. NVivo is qualitative software designed to use specific markers to manage, organize, and support researchers in qualitative data analyzing projects. NVivo organizes raw data (interviews, observations, etc.) and links them with memos and databytes where researchers can make codes, analytical notes, and then edit and rework ideas as the project progresses (Walsh, 2003). I reviewed and analyzed the data to reveal dominant and emerging themes represented in the teachers' responses. An expert in qualitative analysis software worked intensively with me to set up the initial analysis and themes. These themes became the foundation of the data analysis.

Analyzing data in a qualitative study is messy. Although it may sound as though I moved through discrete, sequential steps to arrive at a final product, in actuality I needed to move

back and forth between the data, the literature review, and the analysis. Even with the use of qualitative software, I considered, adopted and changed coding throughout the study, entering codes in the software program and later revising them. I read each transcript multiple times. Initially I was able to sort data into nodes based on the question that was being answered. It was soon discovered that answers to one question often led to comments that provided important data in other areas, so it was necessary to identify specific themes and re-organize data into additional categories. In many cases, the same responses were placed under multiple themes. Coding of the data was reviewed by colleagues and others with expertise in the field.

Once the data was initially organized, I started to draw connections between what the participants had said and what the literature review revealed. In some situations, it was relatively easy to make these associations. In other areas it was difficult to find meaningful links. There were themes that needed to be abandoned due to lack of data to support them. Fellow doctoral students and colleagues were consulted. The most critical and well-supported concepts became the backbone of the study.

## Significance and Limitations of the Study

### Significance

As indicated in the review of the literature, there is a significant deficit in the professional literature specifically addressing issues in high-poverty rural schools (Books, 1997; Williams, 2003). The current study builds understanding of this underrepresented population. The results will be shared with teachers, administrators, and future teachers who want to implement appropriate strategies in similar settings. The results will also be shared with

professional organizations whose members are devoted to securing appropriate legislation and funding for the multitude of students who attend schools in high-poverty rural settings.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations inherent to this study. Because I taught in a high-poverty rural school, I came to the setting with my own biases and assumptions of what it means to teach in settings similar to the case site presented here. I maintain the bias that teachers who work in high-poverty rural settings face a number of obstacles not encountered in other sites. Although every attempt has been made to report and analyze the data as the participants delivered it, personal decisions were made about what to include and exclude from the study as it developed.

The teachers who did not volunteer for the study may be qualitatively different from the participants interviewed in their beliefs and perceptions, which is also a limitation of the study.

Being an outsider in the specific setting is also a limitation. In many ways, I held the role of insider in this study because I knew three of the participants and taught in a similar setting for a number of years, but in other ways, I was definitely an outsider. Teachers in small school districts tend to form close relationships with one another and this community is not always easy to permeate if you are not a daily member. In addition, my position as a university professor set me apart from the participants and made me an outsider. It is assumed that the participants were more guarded in their responses to the researcher than they would have been with someone who held insider status.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter Three outlined the methodology of the study including the rationale for using a qualitative case study to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers in a high-poverty rural setting make LD identification decisions. Special attention was given to the setting and the participants because these factors are such critical components of this qualitative case study. Chapter Three also provided a detailed description of how permission for the study was obtained, how participants were recruited, and how data was collected and analyzed. An explanation of the significance and limitations of the study concludes the chapter.

# CHAPTER FOUR: TEACHER BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Teacher beliefs influence their expectations regarding student performance (Darley & Gross, 1983; Podell & Soodak, 1993). Because teachers in high poverty schools experience many difficulties with regard to identifying students for LD services (Coutinho et al., 2002), I conducted in depth interviews to identify their beliefs and practices associated with serving students in poverty. This included a general discussion regarding the influence of poverty on student opportunities and resources and their work with serving struggling students. I asked teachers to describe their personal experiences and social class background to identify how their upbringing and life experience informed their practice. A central question in this study involved how teacher beliefs and practices associated with struggling students living in poverty may have influenced their decisions and practices regarding making referrals for LD services.

I organized my findings into two broad categories: (1) teacher beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty, including their social class background, experience and values and (2) teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for consideration as a candidate for LD services. The findings in this study are based primarily on the participants' own words as collected in semi-structured interviews. The study yielded six primary themes, the first four themes relate to working with students in poverty and the last two themes involve their LD identification practices.

Findings related to teacher beliefs about poverty (Themes one through four):

1. All of the teachers made comments reflecting a belief that hard work overcomes poverty.
2. More than half of the teachers made comments supporting the belief that schools can and/or should "fix the poverty problem."
3. More than half of the teachers demonstrated complacent acceptance of the poverty at Gilligan.
4. A vast majority of the teachers reported that their own social class background was middle class and all of the teachers made comments that supported middle class values and beliefs.

Findings related to teacher beliefs/practices related to LD identification (Themes five and six):

5. General education teachers viewed pre-referral strategies in a variety of ways, ranging from a necessary step to show compliance with legal requirements to an attempt to serve struggling students.
6. A majority of the special education teachers described an IQ-Achievement discrepancy model for determining LD eligibility and reported that the discussion about exclusionary factors was either not occurring or was occurring without parent knowledge.

The following sections present each of these findings and support them with data collected during the study. Whenever possible, the teachers' own words are used to support the finding.

**Theme 1: All of the teachers made comments reflecting a belief that hard work overcomes poverty and blamed students, rather than the circumstances of living in poverty, for poor performance.**

Three teachers at the high school level directly blamed low student achievement on the students' failure to apply themselves and also placed a certain amount of responsibility for their poor performance on the parents of struggling students. Blaming the student for lack of hard work was evident in statements made by Dan, Dana, and Amber. All three of these teachers are relatively young in age and early in their careers and have only taught in rural settings. When asked what differentiates the kids who succeed from the kids who fail, Dan summed up his belief with the statement: "Really the big categories are those that do and those that don't."

Dan told a story about one particular student:

> And I've got a couple of seniors now that I've been working with for four years. I don't know if you noticed, but Judy kept looking at me during the meeting when their names came up. I didn't want to say anything because they've made their decisions. They've decided that they do not want to graduate. That's it. They'll hang out here until graduation, but they won't graduate. I've worked so hard with those kids. One of them comes in every day for lunch. He's had me for at least one hour a day, sometimes two, for three years now. Some of my classes he's had to repeat three times.

> I use the analogy that he's in a boat that's been hit by a canon ball. He's taking in water his freshman, sophomore, and junior year, and his senior year he decides to start bailing… with a teaspoon. He gave up because he realized the teaspoon is not enough. And that's tough. That's hard to take when you've put that much time into a student.

Dan expressed personal disappointment when a student "chose" not to succeed despite the effort Dan had put into helping him. Although he obviously cared about this student, he also blamed the student for his failure.

Dana also expressed frustration in this same area: "There's a few kids that seem like they might be struggling, but they could do it if they wanted to. They don't do anything to make themselves better. They don't ask for help, they don't work, they don't pay attention, but they can do it because we've seen them do it before." Dana did not tell a story about a specific student, but also placed blame on students who were capable of doing better work than what they were actually producing.

Amber's experience with students in high school special education also reflected the belief that students can and should help themselves: "A kid will give excuses for everything. Why his family doesn't have money, why he is failing in school, why he did not get his homework done. There is always an excuse. I talk to him and his response is you don't know how I live, you don't understand." Like Dan, Amber identified failure as a choice that students make:

> It's the most difficult… with students who have incredible amounts of potential and are just not reaching it. Some kids actually perform close to their actual potential, but those

> who have a huge discrepancy between their potential and actual achievement … it's really hard. I say to them that I can see the path that you are going down and I am seeing where it leads. You don't believe what your parents and teachers and other people are telling you, so when I am being hard on you it is because I see the path you are taking and I know it is not the path you want to be on. I am trying to steer you down a different path, whether or not you choose to follow, that is up to you.

Amber's quote indicated that she sees student failure as the direct result of choices that individual students make.

The other secondary special education teacher, Joyce, did not specifically say anything about students needing to work harder in order to succeed, but when asked about her change in careers from social work to education she stated: "I was interested in social work, but I took a couple of social work classes and just didn't agree with the overall philosophy. It was more about what we can do for people instead of 'This is something you can do for yourself.' I think in education we can do more of that." Her philosophy was also revealed in the posters she displayed in her classroom: "Choose to overcome your circumstances" and "You have the power to stretch reality to fit your dreams."

**Blaming the parents.** Even more prevalent than blaming the students themselves was the practice of blaming the parents. Although some participants were more blatant than others, all of them placed some level of responsibility on the parents for the lack of success of their children. The topic of parent involvement surfaced in the discussion of "greatest challenges" in numerous interviews.

When asked about her greatest challenges, Dana stated:

> I think the biggest thing is just that people don't appreciate education or they don't encourage it. Not everyone, but it's not valued here as much as where I grew up. There isn't the same level of parental support. If a kid's not doing well, we can call home and the parent says, yes we want our child to do well, but then they don't actually do anything to change it. They don't get them here after school or whatever the case is.

Later in the interview, Dana expanded on her frustration with parents by offering a specific example:

> There are some parents who talk the talk, but they don't do anything. There are a couple girls in one family who are supposed to stay after school once a week. When they stay they get their work done. They don't get anything done the rest of the week. Mom's like, "Yeah, we got to get a move on, we've got to get a move on." But it's like you're not doing anything at home for them. You know they always have homework, you know they never get it done.

Dana's frustration with parents seemed to focus on homework issues. At the secondary level, lack of work completion equates with lack of credits for graduation. Dana noted that parents gave verbal support, but did not actually enforce homework completion at home.

At the early elementary level, Tracy noted lack of parent involvement for her students with special needs as a significant factor:

> There's a few students, especially mine, where work sent home never gets signed, no one ever even looks in the child's folder. Parents are gone working, socializing. I know a

> few that were potty-trained after they got to school because no one bothered to take care of it at home. I had one situation where I was working on tying shoes with a student, so I sent a note home explaining that we were working on it at school and it would be great if he would practice at home too. The mom fired back a note saying, "Well I guess you are teaching this skill in a different way than I do so I don't think he's ever going to learn it."

Tracy's frustrations with parents seemed to focus on reinforcing basic self-help skills at home. Tracy clearly perceived the mother's reaction as a lack of support for efforts made at school.

Even gentle, upbeat Polly noted how lack of parental intervention negatively affected the students with whom she works:

> A lot of the students on my caseload had inner ear infections which contributed to their speech and language difficulties. It's not as though the parents don't want to take care of their kids they just don't know how. You can see that in their ability to take care of illnesses and their health. Also the stimulation at home. We've learned about different cultural studies that lower income people have a tendency to not use full sentences and not stimulate high level language. That all plays a part in it too… The lower income families are just trying to survive. They have different priorities.

Polly's statements provided justification for the parents' situations, but she still noted that there was a significant difference in the parenting that students from low income homes receive as compared to the parenting provided for students in more middle class backgrounds.

Parents were also blamed for negative attitudes about school. Steve noted that parent attitudes about school were transparent:

> In [Gilligan] there were just parents who would come in with an attitude. We had parents that would just say straight out, "This school sucked when I went here and it sucks now." School didn't do anything for them. They didn't get anything out of it for whatever reason… They don't see what education could do for them because it just hasn't for them or their family.

Although Steve saw these attitudes as a negative influence, he also addressed the reason behind the negative attitudes. It made sense to him that parents who have not had positive experiences in school would have negative attitudes about the whole institution.

The belief that hard work overcomes poverty infused many of the stories and explanations that the Gilligan teachers shared. The teachers' beliefs about student performance reflected our society's emphasis on the principle that hard work surmounts all obstacles. This philosophy supports the practice of "blaming the victim": When students in poverty fail, they must not be working hard enough.

**Theme 2: Seven out of 11 teachers made comments supporting the belief that schools can and/or should "fix the poverty problem."**

While it is certainly more convenient to place the responsibility for success on students and parents, Gilligan teachers felt a strong obligation to their students and attempted to take responsibility for meeting their needs, both academic and personal. Although literature supports the assertion that "fixing the poverty problem" is beyond the scope of what schools

and teachers can achieve (Gibboney, 2008; Rothstein, 2008), teachers expressed a fervent desire to help their students "overcome" poverty. The most obvious statements supporting the belief that schools can and should fix the poverty problem came from special education professionals, specifically Joyce, Amber, and Polly.

Joyce, who originally went back to school to study social work, provided numerous examples of how she, in conjunction with the school and the community, helped students meet some of their basic needs such as food and clothing:

> We've got a supportive community here, so I've got a cupboard full of clothes. If someone needs clothes, if somebody needs shoes, if somebody needs t-shirts, we can take care of our own. I've got people that bring coats in for kids. A couple of times a year I'll get a call from someone in the community or an organization asking if there's anyone who needs something. We help kids out with eyeglasses and that kind of thing. We've got working poor families who really struggle if one of the kids breaks their glasses. I always have enough money in my budget to meet basic needs if we have to. I always have peanut butter and things here for snack if I have hungry kids.

Joyce clearly believed that schools can and should play a role in "fixing the poverty problem." She took on the role of social worker in providing for her students most basic needs. She did not express frustration about needing to provide non-academic support for her students, but stated: "I've known since I started teaching that you've got to have those basic needs met. I feel like we work with a lot more social issues than just teaching reading and writing." For Joyce, addressing basic needs is part of the job.

Amber, a secondary special education teacher, focused more on showing students how an education can help them overcome poverty: "I try to tell them that education is the great equalizer and evens the playing field, but they don't seem to believe it." Amber's statement reflected a strong belief in the idea that schools can provide students with a route out of poverty. Amber's confidence in this principle was strengthened by her own experiences of rising above poverty. She placed a great deal of responsibility on schools for helping students transcend their impoverished backgrounds: "If you can't find success in school you are probably not going to be able to find it elsewhere and it is going to continue to cycle and do exactly what your parents did."

In addition to holding the school responsible for leveling the playing field, Amber held herself personally accountable for fixing some of the problems her students face: "Every head-banging day is worth it because I think that I've given someone a chance to rise above poverty or rise above whatever their circumstances were and have a better life."

Polly, the speech-language pathologist, talked about making a difference in the lives of students living in poverty as an expected part of her job description. When asked to complete the statement, "Teaching in a poor, rural school is like…" Polly answered: "It's like you are giving and you know it's going to pay off. That's why you go into it in the first place. I think with lower income students they tend to appreciate our strengths."

Although the other participants did not make specific statements that schools should address issues related to poverty, their personal accounts of "going above and beyond" certainly supported the assumption that they expected to make a difference that will help some

of their students break the cycle of poverty. Kay talked about using recess time for remediation. Dan told stories of students spending their lunch time with him and taking them hunting and trapping in the evenings. Dan and Joyce both referred to "Saturday school" which is a non-funded program whereby students come to school Saturday morning to get individual help from their teachers. Kay, Dana, Tracy, and Dan all referred to after-school activities where they worked with students to improve their chances of success. Clearly the teachers at Gilligan felt they had the potential to make a difference in the lives of their students and felt a commitment to do so. This is certainly admirable. Given the theoretical background provided in Chapter Two, however, it is important to question the viability of schools and/or teachers fixing the poverty problem. It is also critical to examine the motives behind perpetuating the myth that schools can and should fix the poverty problem. If teachers are convinced that they can provide the solution to poverty, the rest of society no longer needs to take responsibility for making meaningful social change.

**Theme 3: More than half of the teachers demonstrated complacent acceptance of the poverty at Gilligan.**

Many of the Gilligan teachers also expressed a conviction that supported the idea that "It's not that bad here." Although Gilligan has a high poverty rate and students are dealing with issues with which their middle class peers in neighboring school districts do not need to consider, some teachers minimized the impact of poverty by citing other positive attributes of the Gilligan school district and community.

Mary Ann minimized the experiences of the students in Gilligan by comparing their situation to the urban school where she began her career:

> I think a lot of the kids in the inner city were afraid. There were gang situations. They were distracted. They had to worry about safety. Parents were in prison or not around. I know a lot of the kids feared for their safety and that was always an issue every day. Versus here where it's more nurturing and family-oriented. Not that it's not in the city, but the kids here don't have to worry so much. It's a different lifestyle.

Mary Ann viewed her Gilligan students as having an environment that is much more conducive to learning than the students who experience inner-city poverty:

> I feel that students in a rural community have more of a family setting. In a building like this, everyone knows your student personally. Everybody knows them. Everybody's pulling for them, from the counselor to the custodian. They can talk to the kids and they know. Whereas if you're in a big school, they're just a number. You do feel like you are the only person who can touch that child's life. I think that's a benefit to being in a smaller community.

Joyce also expressed the belief that poverty is much easier to overcome in a rural setting because of the sense of community:

> People are very connected. What causes problems for [Gilligan] is also its salvation because [Gilligan] is really a community that takes care of itself… I think there's a lot of support in the community. We've got a community that really loves its kids… There's a lot of really neat things about this community.

According to Joyce, the positive aspects of Gilligan work to mitigate the effects of poverty on the students.

Contrary to what the statistics tell us about Gilligan, Dan's comments reflected a belief that all schools have their problems and Gilligan is really no different than any other school district:

> I don't think teaching here is any different than teaching anywhere else. Like every job, you've got different headaches. Teaching in a poor, rural school is like teaching anywhere else. You have the same number of headaches, just different ones. Instead of worrying about keeping up with the curriculum and what other teachers are doing, you're worried about whether the kid is going to get supper and if they're off the streets at night… I talk to a lot of teachers in a lot of other schools and I don't think [Gilligan] is any worse or any better than anywhere else. We're just average.

As a result of Dan's belief that "It's not that bad here," he is less likely to question the conditions in which his students live. He is also less likely to look beyond the immediate situation and examine the larger social implications.

Polly was the most positive spokesperson for Gilligan. Given the fact that she lives in Gilligan, has taught in the school district for 28 years, and has a successful son who graduated from Gilligan high school, her perspectives seem reasonable, though definitely biased:

> I'm a Pollyanna. I see that [Gilligan] has risen from the ashes like a phoenix and we have gotten a lot of nice press in the past few years. We're one of the only districts that's

> operating in the black. We're doing awesome work and I would suspect that people who actually read the newspaper might see that too.

Polly's testament certainly implied that all is well in Gilligan. The need for meaningful social change is ignored in the glory and splendor of the "phoenix that has risen from the ashes."

**Theme 4: A vast majority of the teachers reported that their own social class background was middle class and all of the teachers made comments that support middle class values and beliefs.**

Another theme that persistently surfaced throughout the data was the mismatch between the social class lenses of the teachers (which were typically middle class) and the social class experiences of the students they were attempting to serve. This difference in socioeconomic experiences contributed to the beliefs revealed in findings one through three. The middle class lens that most educators bring to the school setting significantly impacts their interpretation of the situation and how to deal with it. As pointed out in the review of the literature, this is a theme that has persisted across settings and can be explained through Lott's (2002) theory of cognitive and behavioral distancing. Lott contends that middle-class people tend to respond to issues about poverty with ignorance, because they are largely isolated from and do not personally know poor people. The data from this study supports this phenomenon.

Ten of the 11 teachers interviewed self-reported growing up in a middle class household. Many of their comments reflected a mismatch between their own backgrounds and that of their students. Dan, who grew up in a rural area, described differences between his rural experience and that of his students:

> In Gilligan, we do have a rural farming community, but we also have another group of people who are rural and not farming. That's different than I'd ever experienced before. I didn't realize there was rural farming and rural not farming. So I'm learning that people that are rural that don't live off the land through farming and agricultural purposes have a different culture than a farming culture. It amazes me when I go to school board meetings and other community meetings and they go around and listen to different comments. These people are worried about things I would never even think about. To me it's, "Why are you worried about that?" It's taken a lot to understand that. I don't know if I ever will really understand it.

Dan's perception that Gilligan has a "rural, not farming" community coincides with the statistical data about Gilligan reported in Chapter Two. According to statistics found on the internet, Gilligan's "urban population" is zero, its rural population is 1,410 (three farm, 1,407 nonfarm). What does it mean to exist in a rural community without farming? Dan went on to share stories of families "living off the land" without farming:

> I have students that talk about eating venison year round. And I say, "Wow, you must go through quite a bit." And they say, "Well if we need more we just go out and get another one."… That's different than the rural that I grew up with. You didn't have to depend on that resource.

Dan also explained how the home life and survival skills of his students make a difference in the classroom. When asked if his rural experience was linked with a town the size of Gilligan, he replied:

> McCalmont is a big difference from here. That's one of the biggest hurdles I had to get over. I wanted to compare the students here to students from a larger school, and you can't. It's not even like comparing apples and oranges; it's like trying to compare trees and dirt. They're two totally different things… I had to understand that's how it is and that education is not even on the list of what's important. If you ask for a list of what they value, it's going to be: We need shelter, we need safety, we need food. That was one of my big deals coping. I feel like I've had to cope with a lot to adjust to teaching here.

Dan's statements reflected not only a difference between his own background and that of his students, but how that difference made teaching difficult. He talked about not understanding why the members of the Gilligan community view the world so differently from his own views.

Even though Amber's childhood was lived in a low-income family, her comments set her taken-for-granted assumptions solidly in the middle class:

> But they can't see how beautiful it would be if they put in the effort. If they decided that their family is really poor and they don't want that for their kids so they are going to work hard in school and go to college. Instead of setting goals for themselves like that, they say well my dad didn't graduate, my mom didn't graduate and they have jobs so it is no big deal. I don't need school; I will be fine without school. Their definition of fine is totally different than the average person's definition of fine… these kids seem to think that even if they can make $8.50 an hour that is good. They don't realize that it's not. If they are having kids that's not okay. If they are living with a bunch of college kids

and making $8.50 an hour that's okay, but it's not fine to have a family and a house and bills to pay.

Viewed through a middle class lens, Amber's comments may seem like "common sense." Yet they are based on assumptions about what people in poverty want and think. Amber, like many teachers, assumed that people in poverty do not want to work hard or go to college. She assumed that they do not know that making $8.50 is not enough to support a family.

The first four themes included findings relative to teachers' beliefs regarding poverty. Themes five and six focus on the findings associated with the teachers' beliefs and practices related to LD referral and identification.

**Theme 5: General education teachers viewed pre-referral strategies in a variety of ways, ranging from a necessary step to show compliance with legal requirements to an attempt to serve struggling students.**

Dan said, "The big thing is we just have to show that we've tried." Prior to a student taking any type of assessment to determine eligibility for special education services, a number of steps should be taken to ensure that a referral for a potential Learning Disability is appropriate. The first step is for the general education teacher to implement strategies in the classroom in an attempt to meet the student's individual needs. Examples of prereferral strategies can include adaptations such as extended time on tests, preferential seating, more individualized attention from the teacher or other school staff, systematic parent communication systems, or behavioral interventions.

This prereferral stage is not mandated by IDEA, but well over half the states (including the state where Gilligan is located) either require or recommend the use of prereferral strategies prior to referring a child of a suspected learning disability (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003). Prereferral strategies should be a common practice in our schools. These strategies should provide interventions necessary to meet student needs and reduce the need for testing, identification, and placement in special education services (McCarney, Wunderlich, & Bauer, 2006). "Evaluation [assessment] is the gateway to special education, but referral charts the course to the evaluation process" (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006, p. 232).

Response to Intervention (RTI) is one way that schools may choose to implement prereferral interventions and is required by most states (including the state where Gilligan is located). RTI demands a much higher level of accountability from classroom teachers than the more general category of prereferral interventions. Whereas a prereferral intervention might be something as simple as changing where a student is seated in the classroom or providing them with additional time on tests, RTI explicitly requires high-quality instruction, research-based interventions, and consistent progress monitoring (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010).

The teachers at Gilligan made comments that clearly indicate their dedication to students. When asked them about the types of prereferral interventions that were being implemented at Gilligan, however, they provided fairly general responses.

Mary Ann was just in the process of making her first referral on the day of her interview. She admitted that she was not familiar with the process and had to ask the special education

teachers what type of paperwork was involved to make the actual referral. She described prereferral interventions that she has implemented: "I've tried changing seating, modifying time, I've tried manipulatives, I've tried graphic organizers, I've tried small groups. If they're still falling behind even though the rest of the class is moving forward, you need something else." Clearly Mary Ann wants her students to succeed and attempts numerous strategies. Her response indicates fairly traditional prereferral activities rather than the more evidence-based strategies required in a Response to Intervention model. In an RTI model, Mary Ann would be expected to provide a different, more intensive type of instruction to the student. RTI typically requires progressively more intense levels of research-based instruction with data collected regarding student progress for each level of intervention.

Dan also talked about what he does prior to referring a student for special education services. Dan's description of prereferral interventions was less specific than Mary Ann's:

> The big thing is we have to show that we've tried. So we'll help them during lunch time or one-on-one during study hall or after school and things like that. Eventually it gets to the point where you say this just isn't working; we've got to try something else.

Like Mary Ann and the other teachers at Gilligan, Dan wanted to help his students and was committed to providing them with additional assistance, including using his own personal time to provide extra attention.

Kay, a fourth grade teacher, reported that of the 17 students in her classroom four have needs beyond what a typical student requires. She explained that three of the four students with needs have been labeled and are already receiving special education services. When

asked if she was considering referring the fourth student, Kay replied: "No, debating. Trying to figure it out. One day they will be fine, and the next day…no idea. Just trying to figure out a pattern." Kay's response also indicated that she is concerned about finding a way to meet her students' needs. She understood that students should not be referred for special education services until the general education teacher has tried to analyze the situation.

Kathy mentioned that she had not made any referrals in her current position as a first grade teacher. With her special education background, Kathy made comments that clearly demonstrated her understanding that other attempts must be made prior to referring students for special education services:

> I think one of the reasons we haven't made very many referrals, first of all is because they are first graders. I think we have a wonderful school counselor here and I send quite a few kids to her for help dealing with those emotional issues. I really look at environmental issues versus a true learning disability. I guess I try to find opportunities to get my students the support they need to deal with the environmental issues. I think as a team we need to look at have we tried to provide the emotional support for the student and the opportunities for the parents to receive support. There's a point where you say, we've covered all those areas and we need to refer.

Kathy's reference to working as a team is a critical aspect in best practices for special education referral. None of the teachers who were interviewed mentioned an instructional support team or teacher-assistance team which is a peer group of colleagues who meet to help the classroom teacher analyze the student's difficulties and generate interventions and accommodations that

the classroom teacher can implement as part of the prereferral process (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Prereferral interventions call for collaboration between general educators and other professionals for the purpose of developing appropriate strategies designed to meet the unique needs of the student under consideration. Best practice mandates shared responsibility and joint decision-making (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006).

I also asked the special education teachers about the use of prereferral interventions at Gilligan. Mackenzie and Amber both reported some lack of effort on the part of general education teachers. Mackenzie offered:

> I don't think a lot of things have been tried before teachers refer students. I think some things have been tried in some cases, but not always. Mostly just giving them a little more attention, checking in with the student on an individual basis to make sure they're getting it.

According to Mackenzie, the prereferral interventions that were being implemented would certainly not meet the RTI criteria for intense, research-based interventions. Amber shared a similar sentiment:

> And other times I think for some teachers it's easier to give up and say, "Oh, there must be something wrong." They pass the buck rather than make an honest effort to give the student what they need.

At the middle school level, Joyce gave the general education teachers credit for trying numerous strategies at the prereferral stage:

> I think they usually try one-to-one, working with them after school, things like that. I think they try extended time, giving them extra time for assignments. I think they try preferential seating. You know, bring them up to the front of the room or whatever. Those are probably the three most common. But it's hard you know, in special ed we're working with a smaller group of kids so it's easier for us to make any of those work than when you've got 15 or 20 other kids.

Joyce brought up an important point about the difficulty of implementing individualized strategies for students when you have a classroom full of students. One of the underlying premises of RTI is that schools should provide targeted and systematic interventions to all students regardless of the setting where they are receiving instruction (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010).

**Theme 6: A majority of special education teachers described an IQ-Achievement discrepancy model for determining LD eligibility and reported that the discussion about exclusionary factors was either not occurring or was occurring without parent knowledge.**

Finding six is based on data that reflects how teachers talked about the identification process. I asked the general education teachers questions such as, "How do you go about determining if a child should be referred for special education?" and "How has special education referral changed since the beginning of your career?" The special education teachers were asked questions such as, "What types of data do you use to determine eligibility for LD?" I purposefully avoided using the terms "IQ-Achievement discrepancy model" and "RTI" and used more open-ended questions to see what the teachers would say without being directly

prompted with language that might affect their responses. Because of this line of questioning, many teachers never mentioned either the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model or RTI.

Only one participant (Polly) indicated that RTI was implemented at Gilligan. The remaining participants either referred to RTI as something that might be used in the future or did not use the term at all. Five of the six special education teachers (all but Polly) indicated that IQ and achievement tests were used to determine eligibility for LD.

**The decision to refer.** If prereferral interventions have been tried and have not produced an acceptable level of success for the student, the next step is to refer the child for special education services. In the RTI model, this means that the student has received progressively more intense levels of research-based instruction with data collected regarding student progress for each level of intervention. In the traditional IQ-Achievement discrepancy model, it is less clear when it is time to refer a child for services and often depends on the general education teacher's beliefs about his/her role in providing instruction to struggling students.

I asked the teachers at Gilligan how they felt about referring students for learning disabilities. In other words, do they feel pressure to either refer more students or to refrain from referring students?

When Mary Ann was asked if she had a sense of how referrals for special education were viewed, she commented:

I would say it would probably be you are referring too many. That would be my guess. No one has actually approached me and said that. I also think because of our special

> programs. We have limited staff and the workload is already high. I think it would be, "Quit referring, because we don't want to hire anyone else."

As Mary Ann pointed out, this message was never explicitly stated, but her interpretation of the culture at Gilligan was that fewer referrals should be made. Mary Ann's actions supported this belief as she was making her first referral at the time of the interview.

Dan also made comments that reinforced the belief that referrals should only be made as a last option:

> I've always felt to refer less. Because you know we have a high number of special needs kids percentage wise. You add one kid to a program and that's a significant percentage. I think from being in school as a student and student teaching in another setting, it seems like we are at a higher number here for numbers of special ed kids, but I think we should refer more. We struggle trying to maintain a decent ratio of special education staff to students. There's more of that, "Get them through and keep the numbers balanced."

The views expressed by Mary Ann and Dan summarized the views of the general education teachers who were interviewed.

Interestingly, the special education teachers had a completely different outlook on this particular topic. According to Polly, who is on the receiving end of referrals for speech and language disorders: "I would say neither. They're letting us do our jobs. We have criteria that are mandated to use by the State and we adhere to those."

Mackenzie's statements provided a similar perception: "They pretty much let me do what I want to do. They never say anything about you can't let any more students into the program or anything like that." Most of Mackenzie's students are identified with Learning Disabilities, so her comments in this area related strongly with the purpose of my study.

In addition to comments about how administration views referrals, Mary Ann made an interesting statement about the decision to refer a student, specifically referring to Gilligan's rural context:

> I really think it depends on who knows who in the community. You know what I mean. That's one of the things in a small community. When everyone knows everyone else, you wonder if the parent is going to go to other parents and say, "Can you believe she referred my child?" I think there's some fear of that. I'm guessing. You wouldn't care in an urban setting because you don't even know them. Here you personally know all of the community members.

The political implications of referring a child for special education services are significant. According the Mary Ann, there are characteristics of a rural setting that may deter a teacher from referring a child who is struggling.

**Appropriateness of referrals.** I asked the special education teachers about the appropriateness of the referrals they were receiving. In other words, when a student has been referred is there a legitimate concern that the teacher was unable to solve with prereferral interventions? In addition, are there teachers who make excessive numbers of referrals or teachers who make very few referrals?

The special education teachers provided mixed comments on this particular topic. Tracy's straightforward response was: "So far all of the referrals have been very legitimate." Joyce agreed with Tracy's perception, providing additional comments about prereferral interventions to support her point: "I think teachers make legitimate referrals. Our criteria has changed a little bit now. More of the onus is on the general education teachers. They have to prove what they've done that didn't work."

Mackenzie was less definitive in her response than either Tracy or Joyce:

> You know I don't really know. I know there's one teacher who works really hard and is willing to try new things and she put a referral in, but I know there are teachers who are a little more set in their ways and refer students because they just don't want to deal with them.

Steve expressed the viewpoint that special education referrals were made by a wide variety of individuals: "I think it's pretty diverse there. I wouldn't say that there any teachers that refer all the time or any teachers that never do. It's pretty spread out. Sometimes parents do, sometimes foster parents." An additional comment by Steve, however, led me to question the validity of some of the referrals:

> If you don't do the homework there's a chance you're going to get referred for having a disability, whether or not you have one. And you might get placed whether or not you have one because a lot of times people see a need and just think, you might not have a disability, but it might be the best thing for them anyway.

Steve's remarks brought an important ethical consideration to the forefront. Should students who are struggling in school receive special education services even if they do not meet the criteria? The next section discusses the data on how this type of decision is made in Gilligan.

**Identification.** As outlined in the Review of Literature, determining the eligibility of a student for LD services is not black and white (Dombrowski et al., 2004; Bocian et al., 1999; Weintraub, 2005). Using the traditional IQ-Achievement discrepancy model misleads some educators into believing that determining eligibility is simply a matter of administering an IQ test and an achievement test and comparing the scores to see if there is a significant discrepancy. Even with this model, however, IEP teams composed of teachers, parents, and administrators are directed by IDEA to consider "exclusionary factors" (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). According to federal law, a child cannot be identified as LD if the learning problem is primarily due to other causes, such as visual or hearing impairments; motor disabilities; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; or economic, environmental, or cultural disadvantage (IDEA-2004). In the context of high-poverty schools, how exactly do IEP teams determine if the learning problems are due to economic, environmental, or cultural disadvantage?

Initially, Amber's response was disappointing, given her background and education in special education: "LD is pretty black and white. You just look at their achievement and their IQ." When I pursued the conversation, however, Amber provided a much more comprehensive explanation regarding the consideration of exclusionary factors:

> We have a lot of kids come in that are very, very tough. When you see their history and how they've been in one place for five months and then another for three months, it

> really looks like inadequate instruction. Not from any one teacher's doing, but simply because they've been moving from one place to another. It's things like mom left dad and now they have to move. It's really hard to make that decision. Sometimes we say this is a child who is capable but is choosing not to do it or has not received adequate instruction and sometimes we say this is a child with a learning disability. And I think sometimes we probably make the wrong decision and sometimes we make the right decision. Sometimes we let a kid in and they probably don't really have a learning disability, they've just had inadequate instruction or been moving around a lot.

Amber readily admitted that the decision is not as black-and-white as she had originally indicated. She was also quick to confess that they have not always make the "right" decision at Gilligan.

When asked about the actual discussion that occurs regarding exclusionary factors, Amber responded:

> That's a really good question. I don't know if it comes up in meetings so much as it does in conversations prior to meetings. We just don't want to bring all of that into a meeting with the parents because it automatically puts their defenses up. A lot of these parents don't have the ability to stick with a conversation like that; sometimes it's confusing for me. So we talk about that a lot before the actual IEP meeting.

Because Amber was willing to be direct and honest with me, she did not necessarily screen her answers for political correctness. She probably would not talk about parents' "limited ability to stick with a conversation" in a more public venue. Yet her response indicated a bias on her part

that school officials have more expertise regarding special education placement than parents do. A paternalistic attitude was revealed when Amber essentially admitted that some conversations and decisions were taken care of without the parents to save them the "trouble" of having to deal with such complicated matters.

Steve also admitted that the conversation about exclusionary factors typically has not occurred during IEP meetings:

> That's really hard because if you determine that it's because of poverty, you could probably determine that for half the kids we identify. So then if you do that, what's going to happen to those students? No one can really be satisfied if we say this kid's problems are because of poverty… That issue hasn't come up a lot… It doesn't seem like it would do a lot of good to bring it up. It seems like it could do a lot of harm.

Both Steve and Amber admitted that the identification process at Gilligan did not include a significant discussion about exclusionary factors, particularly if poverty or inadequate instruction were possible factors. This finding was not surprising given the literature in Chapter Two which reported that the "exclusionary clauses" of the LD definition (i.e., environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage) are often ignored (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003).

Kathy had some interesting insights on this particular topic. She shared her experiences as a student teacher at two different suburban school districts:

> I will say that I noticed some interesting things about poverty in my general education student teaching placements. First I had a third quarter placement in a first-grade classroom in a high-poverty school in [Spruce Falls]. It was my first experience with first

> graders and I didn't really see anything that surprised me. Then I had a fourth quarter placement in a kindergarten classroom in a middle class suburban school in [Mainland]. Those kindergarten students were reading and writing well beyond what I had seen with the first graders in the previous placement. I couldn't believe the difference. I know that the kindergarten classroom had some students from non-traditional families as well, so that's not the issue. The difference is the poverty. Comparing kids from one school to the next is like comparing apples to oranges. There's just no comparison.

Kathy provided a clear and specific example of how student achievement varied from one setting to another. Her own conclusion was that poverty was the deciding factor in how students performed. When asked additional questions about how this dynamic affected the LD identification issue, Kathy added:

> If we were to take some of my students from my low-income [Spruce Falls] placement and transfer them to the placement I had at the middle class school in [Mainland], the teachers would look at them and think, "Wow, there's something really wrong here." But do they really have a disability? That's what it comes down to. I had those two very different student teaching experiences, but did I really look at it and say what's the underlying factor here? Poverty.

Kathy provided a beautiful example of why consideration of exclusionary factors is so difficult and why a student may qualify for services in one district and not qualify in another district.

Response to Intervention (RTI) was designed to alleviate some of the issues related to poverty and provide school districts with an option that meets the needs of all students.

Because Gilligan was struggling with poverty-related issues and how to determine if a child truly had a learning disability, it seemed like an ideal site for RTI implementation. Yet the teachers who were interviewed for this study had a wide range of ideas about the district's position in terms of implementing RTI.

Most of the general education teachers demonstrated a very limited understanding of RTI. Neither Dan nor Dana brought up RTI in their discussion about referrals and placement for LD. Mary Ann commented: "I think there's some government RTI or something that they're starting. They're just starting to talk about it in our district. They pretty much just threw the term out at us this year." Kathy's only comment about response to intervention was: "There's response to intervention now that's out there." Kay referred to "the new system that will eventually go into effect." She recognized the term RTI and reported that the cooperative education service agency that Gilligan belongs to is actually "telling districts to hold up because they are not sure what is going to happen next." Kay went on to say: "Right now we are just getting our feet wet and learning what it is and starting to take steps."

Most of the special education teachers talked about RTI, but Polly was the only one to say that it was actually implemented at Gilligan: "We're in the second year of implementing RTI." In almost direct contrast, Mackenzie stated: "We haven't really gotten into RTI yet, but that will probably involve trying more interventions and documenting them." Tracy also referred to RTI in the context of prereferral interventions: "I think with RTI there will be more documented intervention prior to referrals."

Tracy went on to explain some of the prereferral interventions implemented at Gilligan. When asked if she thought RTI would help or hurt the current situation she replied:

> Can I say both? I think RTI for a lot of people is a mistake. We learned about it a little bit in our classes in college, but it was just starting at that point. I would say there is a big difference between how it is portrayed in our classes and how it is really going out in the field. It documents that you've done something. I think it needs to be laid out more specifically. It's things that teachers should have been doing in their classrooms all along. Sure they can put down a lower grade in their gradebook to show that the student is struggling, but that's not really evidence. Looking at one grade or one test score isn't enough. We need to be documenting all along so we can see if there is a pattern of the student doing worse. So I think once we figure out what we need to do as a district, we'll have more specific information about students that will help us make better decisions.

Tracy's response indicated that RTI's main purpose is prereferral interventions and documentation of those interventions. While RTI is certainly useful in those respects, it is also intended to provide all students with high-quality instruction that meets their needs. Perhaps this difference is what Tracy is referring to when she talked about the difference between how it was portrayed in college classes and how it was actually implemented in the schools. Tracy's perceptions, of course, are based upon what she has experienced in Gilligan.

Steve provided a more diversified outlook on what is happening in the field regarding RTI. Steve's wife was a special education teacher in Mainland, so Steve had knowledge of what

RTI looked like in that setting. When Steve was asked to describe where Gilligan was in terms of RTI implementation, he responded:

> Behind. We're behind because the people who know enough about it don't have time to do anything about it and aren't paid to do anything about it. The people who are paid to know about it really don't. So there's basically no leadership to take that and do with it what needs to be done. But, you know, if I go back into the special education position there I know I'm not going to have time to do it. The other problem is it's a general education initiative, but the people who are supposed to be leading the general education in it don't really feel comfortable, like they don't know what they're doing. It's kind of a philosophy that special education has been using forever. I don't know. I think [Gilligan] will wait until everyone else has it in place and then they'll take some days to go observe it.

I pointed out to Steve that the school where his wife taught (in Mainland) was also high-poverty and asked him why her school was so much further along with RTI than Gilligan: "I think [her school] aspires more to be on the cutting edge." I pushed the analysis a little further by asking if the difference was attributable to Gilligan being in a rural setting. Steve thought about this idea and replied:

> I don't think it has to be. Maybe, but I know plenty of teachers in [Gilligan] who are on the cutting edge on their own. General ed teachers who really take it upon themselves to know what to teach. I don't think it has to be. I don't know.

Steve viewed most of his colleagues as good teachers who are willing to work hard and do whatever they need to do to help students succeed. He struggled with this line of questioning for a while and eventually came to the conclusion that what made Gilligan different from high-poverty schools in larger districts like Mainland was the administration:

> And we all agree, young teachers and veteran teachers alike, that we do a good job in spite of our administration. I think one problem you have in an area like that (out in the boondocks) is that you have a lot of bad administrators that shuffle around.

Steve's perception of ineffective leadership in rural schools is significant. We need to find ways to attract and retain school leaders who have strong leadership skills and understand the rural context. Being an effective leader in a rural setting requires a skill set that is slightly different from the skills needed in other contexts:

> More and more, we can see that administrative leadership in suburbia or the inner city is not an appropriate model for educational leadership or the inner city is not an appropriate model for educational leadership in small and rural communities, where the school is an intimate part of the community. In small towns the superintendents and principals are public leaders, at center stage. They are in a position, therefore, to contribute not only to educational enhancement but to community enhancement as well. They have much more potential power for community change than do their urban counterparts. (Capper, 1993, p. 225)

Being a school leader in a rural district is not easy, especially when we add the difficult task of implementing appropriate strategies for LD identification in light of new special education legislation.

Joyce and Amber, the middle and high school special education teachers, made no mention of RTI. Districts have been much quicker to adopt RTI models at the elementary than at the secondary level, so it is not surprising that Gilligan follows this same pattern.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter presented two categories of findings: (1) teacher beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty, including their social class background, experience and values; and (2) teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for consideration as a candidate for LD services. Within these categories six themes emerged. True to the qualitative paradigm, the participants' own words were used to support each of the findings. Teachers are in the unique position of seeing what happens every day in the classroom and they also have first-hand experience in how the implementation of policy actually occurs. Using the teachers' voices to develop the findings provided a deep description of the situation under investigation and also added authenticity to the findings because I am not simply summarizing the results.

Themes one through four were related to the first category of findings because they provide information about the teachers' beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty.

The first theme revealed that all of the teachers made comments that reflect a belief that hard work overcomes poverty. This was reflected in statements that blame the student

and/or the parent for their own situation. The participants clearly framed poverty as a problem, yet held the poor accountable for their own situation.

The second theme was based on data that more than half the teachers interviewed made comments supporting the belief that schools can and/or should "fix the poverty problem." This belief was exemplified by the teachers' descriptions of everything they do to help their students succeed, from providing food and clothing to teaching school on Saturdays to help students catch up. The teachers' statements reflected a sense of responsibility for their students' futures.

Theme three was that many of the teachers demonstrated complacent acceptance of the poverty at Gilligan. This complacency was demonstrated through the belief that "it's not that bad here." This finding was supported by comments comparing Gilligan to inner-city poverty and by statements that reflect the idea that the problems that Gilligan faces are not unique. In other words, it is not any better in schools that are not high poverty. Teachers also made comments about the many positive attributes that Gilligan possesses that counteract any negative effects of poverty.

The fourth theme is that ten out of the 11 participants reported that their own social class background was middle class, and all of the teachers made comments that support middle class values and beliefs. Many of their comments reflected a mismatch between their own backgrounds and that of their students. This dissonance may explain the findings related to the first three themes.

Themes five and six are related to the second category of findings because they demonstrate teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for consideration as a candidate for LD services.

Theme five was that all of the general education teachers expressed the view that at the pre-referral stage "we just have to show that we tried." The teachers reported trying pre-referral interventions that were well-intentioned but did not provide struggling students with more intensive instruction. The special education teachers' statements corroborated this finding, reporting that their general education colleagues tried minimal interventions prior to submitting a referral.

The sixth and final theme was that the majority of special education teachers described an IQ-Achievement discrepancy model for determining LD eligibility and reported that the discussion about exclusionary factors was either not occurring or was occurring without parent knowledge. This finding was supported by teachers' statements relative to the decision to refer, the appropriateness of the referrals made, and the actual identification process. The teachers also made limited reference to Response to Intervention (RTI) and their responses indicated that they had limited knowledge of RTI, with only one participant reporting the RTI had been implemented at Gilligan. None of the other participants made comments in support of this statement.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION & SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how teachers in one high poverty rural school district made LD identification decisions. This research used semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers to answer the following research questions: How do teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions? Germane to this primary research question were three related questions: (1) What beliefs do teachers hold about poverty and how it affects their students? (2) What do teachers believe about their role in a high-poverty setting? and (3) How do teachers determine if a child has a learning disability or if other factors (such as poverty) are contributing to their academic difficulties?

These questions were essentially answered by the findings presented in Chapter Four. In qualitative case studies, "the interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Because of this, I was not surprised to discover that the data collected did not always directly correlate to a specific research question, but did provide insight into the situation being explored.

This chapter analyzes, interprets, and synthesizes the findings according to the following analytic categories:

1. How the teachers' middle class backgrounds and beliefs about poverty detract from consideration of economic reform. (Research Questions 2 and 3)
2. The mismatch between the teachers' perceptions of the LD identification process and what is mandated by law. (Research Questions 1 and 4)

These analytic categories emerged as I considered the data and findings through the lens of critical theory. The analysis goes beyond the distinct findings by connecting them with the scholarly literature and attempting to create a more comprehensive understanding of how LD identification decisions are made in a high-poverty rural school.

**Analytic Category 1: How the teachers' middle class backgrounds and beliefs about poverty detract from consideration of economic reform.**

This first analytic category addresses the research questions: What beliefs do teachers hold about poverty and how it affects their students; and what do teachers believe about their role in a high-poverty setting? It is developed from the first four themes outlined in Chapter Four. The findings indicated that ten of the 11 teachers interviewed had middle class backgrounds. Amber was the only participant who self-reported coming from a background of poverty, although her socioeconomic status at the time of the interview was middle class and there were aspects of her upbringing that represent middle class beliefs. For example, Amber differentiated her experience growing up in poverty from that of the Gilligan students:

> The difference is that I did have parents who were supportive and told me you need to go to college. You're going to go to college. They always, when I got home, told me to sit down and do my homework. I don't know how they managed to do that, but it was enforced. And I just don't think a lot of these kids have parents who value education as much as they should.

The mismatch between the teachers' socioeconomic backgrounds and the lived experiences of their students is not unusual. In most high-poverty schools, students are taught by teachers whose backgrounds are dissimilar to their own. The majority of teachers in American schools are white, middle-class females (Diffily and Perkins, 2002; Olmedo, 1997). The increasingly diverse population of students in the schools, including in the area of socioeconomic status, has amplified the difference between the backgrounds of most teachers and the students for whom they are responsible (Zeichner, 2003).

As evidenced in Chapter Four, the teachers of Gilligan School District have developed their philosophies and belief systems regarding poverty around some strongly-supported beliefs that are sustained by our society. The findings support the contention that the participants embraced the ideas that hard work overcomes poverty, that schools can and should "fix the poverty problem," and that the teachers accepted the idea that "it's not that bad here." The data also revealed that there is a mismatch between the social class lenses of the teachers and the students. These findings do not make the teachers atypical in any way. As pointed out in Chapter Four, society has socialized individuals to accept certain myths as truth. Acknowledging these ideas as fact makes it much easier to accept social class differences without questioning the status quo that benefits those of us who live a middle class existence.

Although the belief in these myths about poverty is typical, educators should consider the possibility that these beliefs create issues for exacting meaningful change that can substantially help students in high-poverty schools. If people believe that hard work overcomes poverty, it makes sense to blame the poor for their own situation. This belief encourages

placing blame on students and parents because the assumption is that they are simply not working hard enough. The posters in Joyce's classroom epitomize this belief: "Choose to overcome your circumstances" and "You have the power to stretch reality to fit your dreams." While these messages are meant to be inspirational, they perpetuate the belief that poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics. There are strong statistics that refute this belief. Eighty-three percent of children from low-income families have at least one employed parent; almost 60 percent have at least one parent who works full-time and year-round (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004). There is a severe shortage of living-wage jobs that requires many poor adults to work two, three, or four jobs (Gorski, 2008). In direct contrast to the belief that poor people have weak work ethics, the Economic Policy Institute (2002), reported that poor working adults actually spend more hours working each week than their wealthier counterparts.

A student at Gilligan could have a parent or parents who are working multiple jobs and the family is still living in poverty. Yet they see other individuals who only work one job, 40 hours a week, and are not living in poverty. Why would a child believe that they have the power to "overcome their circumstances" when they are witnessing direct evidence to the contrary? Do the students of Gilligan truly have the power to stretch reality to fit their dreams? If they do have this power, does it come from education and the effectiveness of their schools? Can schools do enough to overcome the effects of poverty?

The participants in this study obviously felt that they made a difference in the lives of their students. The findings indicate that they cared about their students and worked hard to

meet their needs, both educationally and, in many cases, personally. Joyce talked about providing basic necessities such as food and clothing. Gilligan teachers were donating their own time to provide additional support and instruction after school and even on Saturdays. Through the lens of critical theory, it is important to consider the questions: Is this enough? Can the hard work and dedication of teachers overcome the fact that most children who live in poverty come to school years behind their middle-class peers in language development, social behavior, and general knowledge of the world?

Amber, who grew up poor herself, obviously believed that schools can divert students from a path of chronic poverty: "I try to tell them that education is the great equalizer and evens the playing field, but they don't seem to believe it." Why are Gilligan's students unwilling to believe this statement? Perhaps because all of the evidence they have witnessed in their own lives is in direct conflict with what Amber is telling them. The research sides with the students' perceptions: "Given all that we know from neuroscience about early brain development and the role of environment in nurturing aptitude, schools cannot be expected on their own to close the achievement gap between rich and poor" (Gibboney, 2008). Without reforms that narrow the vast socioeconomic inequalities in the United States, schools cannot "even the playing field" as Amber purports. Certainly there are individuals like Amber who overcome the odds and outperform students from much wealthier backgrounds, but on average, socioeconomic disadvantage lowers achievement (Rothstein, 2008).

Teachers and the general public have come to accept the myth that schools can fix the poverty problem because it is much easier to think about implementing reform in the schools

than it is to question the entire economic structure. People in the middle class benefit from this belief. Fixing the schools is manageable and does not hold many people directly accountable. Facing the fact that the public needs to take a serious look at how we distribute resources in this country is likely to affect the non-poor in a much more personal manner because it will impinge on their individual financial situations. Teachers have been presented a deliberately flawed version of reality: Good schools and good teachers can level the playing field. Consideration of factors such as socioeconomic status is simply "making excuses." The responses of the teachers at Gilligan indicate that they do feel a responsibility for evoking change, regardless of the circumstances. They also, however, express frustration with the conditions that they face on a daily basis.

> Teachers see for themselves how poor health or family economic stress impedes students' learning. Teachers may nowadays be intimidated from acknowledging these realities aloud and may, in groupthink obedience, repeat the mantra the "all children can learn." But nobody is fooled (Rothstein, 2008).

The teachers were reluctant to make negative statements about Gilligan. Joyce and Mary Ann both praised Gilligan for its sense of community and Dan reported: "I talk to a lot of teachers in a lot of other schools, and I don't think [Gilligan] is any worse or any better than anywhere else. I don't think there's anything wrong with [Gilligan]." Although many of the teachers at Gilligan focus on the positive aspects of their school, it is significant that very few of them choose to educate their own children in the Gilligan School District, preferring to keep their offspring in the middle class schools available in other municipalities. In fact, Polly was the only participant

whose child attended Gilligan schools. All of the other teachers either lived in other school districts or did not have children.

In summary, the teachers at Gilligan have middle class backgrounds that have shaped their belief system such that they accept some commonly held assumptions about poverty. These beliefs encourage members of society (including the participants in this study) to blame people in poverty for their own situation, based on the assertion that hard work overcomes poverty. Ironically, society also blames schools, purporting that educational institutions can and should fix the poverty problem. The teachers in this study demonstrate a strong belief that they can and should try to ameliorate the effects of poverty on their students. They reveal this belief with their actions as much as their words. When the teachers at Gilligan provide their students with food, clothing, and extra assistance after school and on weekends, they are demonstrating their attempts to "fix the poverty problem." Because these teachers, and society in general, are so focused on fixing individual students, they are willing to ignore the larger economic situation which created the poverty problem in the first place. Critical theory, however, encourages challenging the status quo, particularly when it victimizes a segment of the population.

**Analytic Category 2: The mismatch between the teachers' perceptions of the LD identification process and what is mandated by law.**

This analytic category addresses the research questions: How do teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions; and how do they determine if a child has a learning disability or if other factors (such as poverty) are contributing to their academic difficulties?

Findings five and six contribute to our understanding of these particular questions. The fifth finding was that all of the general education teachers expressed the view that at the pre-referral stage only minimal interventions were necessary. Finding six was that the majority of special education teachers described an IQ-Achievement discrepancy model for determining LD eligibility and reported that the discussion about exclusionary factors was either not occurring or was occurring without parent knowledge.

The results of this study answered the primary research question: How do special education teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions? In Gilligan, LD identification is following an outdated model that no longer meets the requirements of IDEA. The process is not followed systematically and the perceptions of the teachers vary widely depending on who you ask. The findings indicated a lack of attention to exclusionary factors and no real progress on the implementation of RTI. Despite the negative nature of these discoveries, the teachers give every indication of having good intentions. In addition, it appears that the teachers are limited by some system-motivated practices that have discouraged them from implementing RTI.

On the surface, not following standard procedure seems to be a student-centered practice. Teachers want to get students the help they need as quickly as possible and are sometimes making a referral prior to attempting adequate interventions in their own classrooms. Based on what the teachers know, they are acting in the best interests of the students who are struggling. In reality, RTI could provide a much more student-centered approach than what is currently practiced at Gilligan.

What is the significance of using an outdated approach for labeling students with LD? The initial response may be that it is a compliance issue, but maintaining compliance with the law is only one reason for implementing the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. According to the Gilligan teachers, there are many students in their classrooms who demonstrate academic needs that are not easily met within the current structure. Many of these students fail classes and even fail to graduate despite the best efforts of their teachers. The RTI model is based on the premise that schools should not wait until students fail to provide them with the help they need. In other words, all students who demonstrate academic needs should receive targeted and systematic interventions (Buffum et al., 2010).

Traditionally, schools have believed that "failure to succeed in a general education program meant the student must, therefore have a disability" (Prasse, 2009). This type of thinking encourages schools to focus on problems within individual students rather than challenging the fundamental structure and philosophy that most schools embrace. In the review of literature, I presented some alternate lenses for viewing disability. Rather than accepting the traditional medical model of disability, a transformative paradigm is offered as an alternative. Disability, like poverty, can be viewed as originating "in the inadequacies of its victims or in the pathologies of social institutions" (Edelman, 1988, p. 3). Critical theory suggests that looking at the schools and challenging the status quo is equally important as diagnosing individual students.

In addition to not meeting the legal mandates regarding the implementation of RTI, Gilligan teachers shared that they are not addressing the exclusionary factors outlined in IDEA

2004. The teachers appear to be avoiding the discussion about the role of poverty in the academic struggles that individual students experience because they do not see how that discussion will benefit students. As Steve pointed out, "That's really hard because if you determine that it's because of poverty, you could probably determine that for half the kids we identify. So then if you do that, what's going to happen to those students? No one can really be satisfied if we say this kid's problems are because of poverty." Amber admitted that when the discussion of exclusionary factors does occur, it is not happening at the IEP meeting in front of the parents:

> I don't know if it comes up in meetings so much as it does in conversations prior to meetings. We just don't want to bring all of that into a meeting with the parents because it automatically puts their defenses up… So we talk about that a lot before the actual IEP meeting."

The review of literature reports that ignoring this mandate is common practice as the findings illustrate. In this case, critical theory could be applied to question the appropriateness of the legal mandate. Is it appropriate to refuse services to a student if their difficulties stem primarily from the effects of poverty? If we take the individual student-centered approach and provide services to the student, are we exacerbating the economic situation that created the problem in the first place? The current study does not provide answers to these questions, but does provide a specific context for considering them.

In summary, there is a mismatch between how Gilligan identifies students as having LD and what the law mandates. At the individual student level, the practices could be justified as

student-centered because teachers are focused on obtaining services to help their struggling learners. Yet, the law explicitly states that a learning disability cannot be due primarily to factors such as poverty. One possible explanation for the teachers' decisions about referring students for special education is that the teachers' beliefs about poverty encourage them to seek special education services sooner than they might for a child from a middle class background. Although this study was not experimental in nature, the research cited in the review of literature demonstrated how the perception of poverty affects judgments that educators make regarding performance on assessments and the decision to refer a child for special education services (Darley & Gross, 1983; Podell & Soodak, 1993). It is possible that teachers in high-poverty schools are less likely to implement extensive prereferral interventions such as the intensive instructional practices expected in RTI because they do not believe it will make a difference for their students.

Findings indicate the teachers at Gilligan have not had the professional development opportunities to learn about RTI and how to implement it. This possibility seems likely given the fact that most of the general education teachers did not even mention RTI when asked about special education referral. Mary Ann was the general education teacher who had the most to say about RTI: "I think there's some government RTI or something that they're starting. They're just starting to talk about it in our district. They pretty much just threw the term out at us this year." This comment verifies the lack of district-wide professional development opportunities on this topic.

Looking at the situation through the lens of critical theory raises important questions about the implications of using a disability label instead of making fundamental changes in how schools operate. The teachers may be limited in how they view struggling students because they have preconceived notions about poverty. The teachers have also not had enough exposure to the RTI model to understand how it could benefit their students. It is likely that both of these explanations are contributing to the mismatch between how Gilligan teachers identify students as having LD and what the law mandates.

## Revisiting Assumptions from Chapter One

In Chapter One, I outlined some basic assumptions relative to this study. It is important to revisit these assumptions in light of the findings and the analysis of the data. These assumptions are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The first two assumptions were based on the state licensing requirements for the case study site. The first assumption was that all of the teachers had taken at least one course in special education as part of their preservice education, and the second assumption was that all of the special education teachers had taken at least one course in assessment practices specific to special education. The rationale for including these assumptions is to affirm that all of the participants had exposure to the basic knowledge and skills required for implementing appropriate identification procedures in their school. It was not important to substantiate these assumptions, but it was critical to acknowledge them.

The third assumption was that LD identification is often fraught with ambiguity. The research supports this assumption as well as my professional experiences on assessment

teams. The teachers at Gilligan confirmed that the LD process leaves room for interpretation and is not as objective as one might think. The review of literature also validated this assumption.

Fourth, there are times when the law regarding identification is interpreted differently to best meet the needs of an individual student. In other words, the exact wording of the law can be manipulated to mean more than one thing, depending on the situation. My personal experiences in the schools as well as informal conversations with teachers from other schools support this premise. The teachers at Gilligan reported similar experiences.

The final assumption noted was that high-poverty rural settings have high numbers of students who need additional assistance and that teachers in these settings often do what they think is best to meet the needs of these students regardless of what standard procedure may dictate. As in the prior assumption, this assertion is grounded in my own experiences in a high-poverty rural school as well as discussions with peers in similar contexts. The teachers' own stories endorsed the assumption that students in a high-poverty rural context often have needs that surpass what the teachers have anticipated. As the teachers at Gilligan explained, because the needs are great, they often go "above and beyond" what is typically expected of teachers in order to help their students succeed.

## Summary of Interpretation of Findings

This chapter analyzed the findings of the study in order to provide an explanation for how teachers in a high-poverty, rural school district make LD identification decisions. The findings were interpreted within two analytic categories: (1) How the teachers' middle class

backgrounds and beliefs about poverty detract from consideration of economic reform; and (2) The mismatch between the teachers' perceptions of the LD identification process and what is mandated by law. The theoretical framework presented in the review of literature was applied to the findings in an attempt to deepen understanding of how the current economic and social structure of society affects the way that children are educated, particularly children in high-poverty, rural contexts.

It is important to consider the findings of this study with caution because the sample size was small and limited primarily to what was revealed in interviews. I did not have access to actual IEP meetings where decisions about LD identification were being made. Given these limitations, the implications of the study can only be considered relative to the perceptions of the individuals who were interviewed.

I also acknowledge the role that personal bias can play in the analysis of qualitative data. Acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of the "researcher as instrument" inherent to qualitative research, this chapter is essentially the account of how I made sense of the findings.

# CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how the LD identification process is implemented in a high-poverty rural setting. In working toward this purpose, the study explored the question: How do teachers in poor, rural school districts make LD eligibility decisions? The study also investigated several related questions: What beliefs do teachers hold about poverty and how it affects students in the school setting? What do they believe about their role in a high-poverty setting? How do they determine if a child has a learning disability or if other factors are contributing to their academic difficulties? The findings of the study have been presented in two broad categories: (1) teacher beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty; and (2) teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for consideration as a candidate for LD services. In this chapter I draw conclusions about the significance of what has been discovered and present actionable recommendations as well as insights on the research process and its impact on teaching and research.

The research findings suggest that the teachers in the Gilligan School District are like many teachers across the country. They care about their students and they work hard to help their students succeed. There are a lot of positive student-centered practices being employed at Gilligan. In relation to poverty issues, the teachers' reactions range from sympathy and nurturing to placing blame on the parents or the students themselves. As far as the identification of learning disabilities is concerned, the teachers at Gilligan describe practices

that reflect good intentions, such as implementing traditional prereferral interventions. As revealed in Chapter Four, practice was far from following the letter of the law.

## Conclusions

The conclusions from this study are aligned with the research questions and the findings and have been organized in two categories: (1) teacher beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty; and (2) teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for consideration as a candidate for LD services. Within these two areas, the findings address six themes. The first four themes are related to teacher beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty: (1) perception that hard work overcomes poverty; (2) belief that schools can and should fix the poverty problem; (3) belief that "it's not that bad here;" and (4) the mismatch between the middle class background of the teachers and the high poverty experiences of their students. The last two themes address teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for LD services: (5) perception that only minimal pre-referral strategies are necessary; and (6) LD identification practices that do not follow the mandates of special education law. This section features a discussion of the major findings and conclusions of the study, followed by my recommendations and final thoughts.

### Perception that Hard Work Overcomes Poverty

The first finding of this study is that all of the teachers interviewed made comments that reflect a belief that hard work overcomes poverty. This belief encourages teachers to blame parents and students for their situation. The participants made remarks that students could be successful if they worked harder. This belief does not take into account the myriad of

circumstances that make hard work in school seem fruitless to many students in poverty. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that there is a mismatch between what the teachers believe and what the students have experienced that may cause dissonance or lack of trust of which the teachers may not be aware. The belief that parents may not be working hard enough has implications for the teacher-parent relationship as well.

**Belief that Schools Should Fix the Poverty Problem**

The second finding of this study was that many teachers provided evidence that they believe that schools can and should fix the poverty problem. From this finding, it could be concluded that teachers take responsibility for their students' learning and well-being even when there is evidence that students in poverty do not have access to the same advantages as their middle class peers. Another conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that teachers are not seeking solutions outside their own innovation and hard work. In other words, they do not question the larger socioeconomic structure that has placed the families at Gilligan in poverty. Acknowledging the role of the economic structure could lead teachers to advocate for their students on an economic level, not just an academic level. Equally important, teachers could provide students with the knowledge they need to advocate for themselves.

**Complacent acceptance of the poverty at Gilligan**

The study's third major finding was that several of the teachers expressed the belief that "it's not that bad here." Some of them promoted the positive aspects of Gilligan, and others made statements about how Gilligan is really no different than other school districts. From this finding, I conclude that many of the teachers see no reason to advocate for their students or

their school when it comes to accessing resources or making systemic changes. If it is not that bad in Gilligan, why would anyone need to do anything to fight for substantial change?

**Mismatch in Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

The fourth major finding revealed by this research is that there is a mismatch between the middle class backgrounds of the teachers and the experiences of the students living in poverty. Overwhelmingly, the teachers self-reported middle class backgrounds. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that unexamined differences in social class experiences may lead to misunderstandings about expectations. Students are affected by this mismatch because teachers do not have adequate insight about how poverty influences life opportunities. This lack of understanding leads teachers to blame students and hold them accountable for their own success or failure rather than providing them with the support and advocacy that they need.

**Perception that Only Minimal Prereferral Interventions are Necessary**

The fifth finding gleaned from the study is that the participants were only engaging in minimal prereferral interventions prior to referring a child for special education services. This finding could be used to support the conclusion that the teachers in this high-poverty setting do not see the value in attempting more intensive interventions for struggling students. Perhaps the poverty factor influences the expectation that students who struggle are not going to succeed in the general education classroom. Another possible conclusion is that teachers have not been provided with the knowledge and skills to implement the more intensive interventions that are characteristic of the RTI model.

**LD Identification Practices that do not Follow Legal Mandates**

The final primary finding was that the legal mandates outlined in IDEA 2004 and state law are not being implemented. This finding was particularly noteworthy in the lack of RTI implementation and the avoidance of the discussion regarding exclusionary factors. One conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that the teachers are student-centered rather than system-motivated and do not see the value in following the letter of the law. In other words, if they can get assistance for a struggling student by disregarding certain aspects of special education law, then they will do so. Another potential conclusion is that the teachers do not have adequate training in LD identification, particularly in light of new legislation. Even the youngest teachers took their coursework in special education prior to the widespread implementation of RTI. Many of the teachers have not taken special education coursework for many years, meaning RTI was not even a component of the teacher education curriculum. This study found no evidence of RTI professional development provided for the Gilligan teachers and there was data that indicated that administration had stated that Gilligan should "hold off" on RTI implementation for now.

**Summary of Conclusions**

In summary, the conclusions from this study follow the research questions and the findings and address the following areas: (1) perceptions that hard work overcomes poverty; (2) beliefs that schools can and should fix the poverty problem; (3) beliefs that "it's not that bad here;" (4) the mismatch between the middle class background of the teachers and the high poverty experiences of their students; (5) perceptions that only minimal pre-referral strategies

are necessary; and (6) LD identification practices that do not follow the mandates of special education law. The first four areas contribute to our understanding of teacher beliefs and experiences serving students in poverty. Themes five and six provide information related to teacher beliefs and practices with regard to referring students for consideration as a candidate for LD services.

## Recommendations

After careful examination of the findings in the search for meaningful conclusions, I submit the following recommended actions for consideration by teachers, school administrators, and education scholars:

**Action 1: Institutions of higher education and school district administrators should provide educational activities to both future and current educators that challenge stereotypical beliefs about people living in poverty.**

The stereotypical beliefs that teachers hold about poverty are highly evident in the findings. It is likely that teachers do not realize that they are placing blame on students and parents. Taking a closer look at the facts about poverty and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about the poor is critical to the formation of positive relationships and finding ways to help all students be successful. "Mythology cannot, in the long run, inspire better instruction" (Rothstein, 2008). Once the myths have been uncovered and analyzed, educators will be in better position to focus on solutions rather than blame. In order to effect meaningful change, educators need to cease the blaming and focus efforts on solutions that improve instruction and relationship-building.

Blame also affects teachers when society places blame on high-poverty schools for their failure to address the multitude of issues with which they are presented. Blaming schools for circumstances they cannot change does not solve the problem. Education scholars have an obligation to make stakeholders aware of the challenges for which schools should and should not be held accountable.

**Action 2: Policy makers should cconsider socioeconomic reform in discussions about school improvement.**

Improving educational outcomes for students in high-poverty schools can only be accomplished with a combination of school-based reforms and changes that narrow the vast socioeconomic inequalities in the United States. Schools alone cannot fix the poverty problem. Instead of taking the blame for the low achievement in high-poverty schools, educators should consider joining forces with advocates of social and economic reform to improve the conditions from which children come to school (Rothstein, 2008). Social and economic reforms should be implemented together to create an environment in which the most effective teaching can take place.

**Action 3: School administrators should support teachers in their efforts to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms.**

Teachers need to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of a wide range of student needs. This is especially important in high-poverty schools. Meeting the needs of all students is not an easy task and teachers need assistance in this endeavor. Teachers need support to develop the skills related to differentiation. They also deserve recognition for their

efforts in this area. It is important to celebrate successes, and it is also essential to take a critical look at our teaching practices. Instead of assuming that student failure is due to a problem within the child, educators need to consider that they may not be teaching him or her correctly and seek strategies that are more effective. RTI provides the tools for general education teachers to meet this goal.

**Action 4: School administrators should facilitate the implementation of assessment methods that are designed so that students receive the assistance they need as early as possible.**

RTI also provides a framework for meeting this goal. Unfortunately, many small rural schools like Gilligan have not received the training or resources to implement RTI and, according to the teachers interviewed for this study, have even been discouraged from examining RTI as a viable option until a later date. RTI is an improvement over the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model because it is not a "wait to fail" approach. Struggling learners begin receiving interventions at the earliest sign of difficulty. Rural students need access to the same high-quality programming options that are available in middle class urban and suburban settings.

**Action 5: Researchers should continue to explore poverty issues in rural contexts.**

As indicated in the review of literature, rural schools are underrepresented in the scholarly literature. Although rural children are more likely to be poor than either non-rural or children in the United States overall (Sherman, 1992), the literature revealed little about the rural poor (Books, 1997). Although this study contributes to the void of research regarding

rural poverty and its effects on the education of children, it is only a start. There is much work to be done related to high-poverty, rural schools.

## Final Thoughts

I began this project with a passion for improving practice and conditions in high-poverty rural schools. Spending countless hours reviewing the literature, talking to teachers, analyzing the data, and writing has only intensified my desire to make this topic a long-term piece of my research agenda. I have had multiple opportunities to share my expertise with rural school districts who have invited me to speak at their professional development workshops. I hope to extend my audience to a wider circle of professionals who have the power to not only address school reform, but also impact economic policy and decision-making. Rural teachers are making a difference and have significant impact on the lives of their students, but they cannot do it alone.

I also began this research with a strong belief in the power of story. The stories I collected during my time at Gilligan strengthened my confidence in the impact that stories can have on learning. I continue to use stories in my teaching and encourage my students to use this practice in their own classrooms someday. The story of Gilligan provides a picture of how a rural school district copes with the demands of a high-poverty population in their attempt to meet all students' needs. Through the teachers' own voices, a much deeper sense of reality is developed than what is gleaned from a statistical study of high-poverty rural schools.

I began this study with the philosophy that the issues presented in the context of a high-poverty rural school district go beyond the scope of education and really involve concepts of

social justice. The story of Gilligan reinforces this viewpoint and has also helped me develop some meaningful ideas of how to pursue social justice for students in this setting. What I learned is that identifying students for learning disabilities in a poor, rural school district is both student-centered and system-motivated. The teachers of Gilligan are student-centered in their day-to-day work in the classroom. The system, unfortunately, is based on a complex set of myths which influence the teachers' and the public's basic attitudes and beliefs about poverty and schooling. Through education, reform, and support for teachers who work in our nation's high-poverty schools, appropriate instructional strategies and assessment measures can be developed that improve the outcomes for all students.

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# Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form

Appendix B: Interview Questions

**Appendix A: Consent Form**

**Learning Disabilities in a Poor, Rural School**

**Research Information for Participants**

You are invited to participate in a research study involving teachers in poor, rural schools. The study is being conducted for a doctoral dissertation. The principal investigator is Renee Chandler, doctoral student in the Leadership, Policy, and Administration program at the University of St. Thomas, under the direction of Dr. Tom Fish, chair of the dissertation committee.

I am interested in getting your perspective as a teacher in a poor, rural school district. I would like to interview you about your experiences, thoughts, and opinions. I would also be interested in observing and/or assisting in your classroom. This consent form outlines the procedure I will be using, how confidentiality will be maintained, and potential risks of participating. Your participation is voluntary. I encourage you to read the consent form carefully and ask me any questions you may have about participating.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:** Researchers have been studying the phenomenon of overrepresentation in special education for years, but have focused their efforts on ethnic overrepresentation, largely ignoring the effects of poverty. Hopefully what is learned through your participation will contribute to our understanding of the link between special education and poverty.

**PROCEDURES:** With your consent, interviews will be scheduled over a 12-month period. You will determine the location and time of each interview, but it should be a quiet space without interruption. The interviews will be recorded on audio tape. I may also take notes in case portions of the tape become inaudible. I will transcribe the tapes or hire a transcriber who will be required to sign a confidentiality statement. You will have the opportunity to read and edit interview transcripts so they convey your intended meaning. The transcripts of the interview tapes will be analyzed and interpreted by the principal investigator.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** You will determine what you disclose in the interviews and are not required to share anything you feel is too private. I am committed to maintaining confidentiality to the best of my ability. For this reason, pseudonyms will be used for participants, their school, principal, other teachers, etc. There is a slight risk that participants may be recognized despite the use of pseudonyms.

I will store the audio-tapes and transcribed interviews in a locked file cabinet in my home. They will only be accessible by me and will be used for the purposes of the dissertation and possible subsequent publications and presentations to college classes, professional meetings and

conferences. As the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Tom Fish will also have access to all data collected. Tapes will be retained one year beyond the defense of the dissertation and then destroyed. Transcripts will be retained for research purposes.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate and later change your mind, you may withdraw from the study at any time by contacting Renee Chandler in person, via phone, or in writing.

**CONTACTS/QUESTIONS:** Please contact Renee at chandlerr@uwstout.edu or (715) 232-2679 if you would like more information or are interested in participating in this study.

## Consent Form

## Signature Page

STATEMENT OF CONSENT: I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers to all of my questions. I consent to participate in the study, including recording of all interview responses. I realize that I may withdraw this consent at any time during the study.

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date _____

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for All Teachers:

1. Tell me about your teaching career.
2. Tell me about the school where you are currently teaching.
3. How would you characterize the socioeconomic composition of the school?
4. How is this similar to or different from the socioeconomic composition of the school(s) you attended as a child?
5. Tell me about your current caseload.
6. What are some of the biggest challenges in your current position?
7. What are some of your greatest rewards in your current position?
8. How would you rate your effectiveness as a teacher?
9. How do teachers characterize/describe this school?
10. What role do parents play in the school?
11. What perceptions do community members have about your school?
12. What perceptions do people outside the community have about your school?
13. How does low socioeconomic status affect students' success in school?
14. How does the socioeconomic status of your students affect your teaching?
15. How do you go about determining if a child should be referred for special education?
16. Would you say that there is pressure from administration to either refer more students or refer fewer students for disabilities?
17. How many students have you referred for special education over the past school year? Over your teaching career?
18. How has special education referral changed since the beginning of your teaching career?
19. How has No Child Left Behind legislation affected your teaching?
20. Complete the following sentence: "Teaching in a poor, rural school is like _____."

Interview Questions for Special Education Teachers

1. How do you go about determining if a student has a learning disability or if they have simply not received adequate instruction?
2. What types of data do you use to determine eligibility for LD?
3. Tell me about a time when it was particularly difficult to determine LD eligibility.
1. How is your role as special education teacher perceived by your general education colleagues? Administration?
2. How would you characterize the referrals that you receive? Tell me about some of the referrals that you have encountered.

3. What types of interventions are teachers implementing before they refer a student for special education?
4. How would you rate your own success as a teacher?
5. How do you think your self-perceptions affect your teaching?
6. Think of a general education colleague who ***rarely*** makes referrals. How do you think they would rate their own success as a teacher? Do you view that teacher as effective?
7. Think of a general education teacher who ***frequently*** makes referrals. How do you think they would rate their own success as a teacher? Do you view that teacher as effective?
8. What characteristics, traits, and skills make a general education teacher effective?
9. What characteristics, traits, and skills make a special education teacher effective?